THE FABULOUS BEN THOMPSON

WESTERN ACTION

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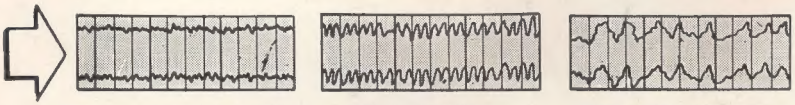

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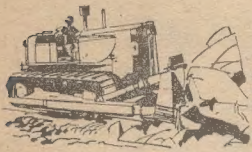

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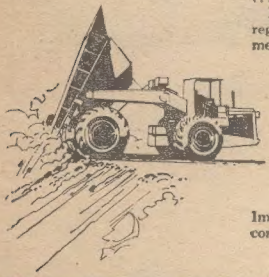

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WESTERN ACTION

132 Pages

VOLUME 23 November, 1959 Number 3

true story of a famous bad man

THE FABULOUS BEN THOMPSON ..... *Harold Gluck* 6
He rode high, wide, and handsome — a hell-raiser and a no-good— and some oldtimers still swear there was no one ever tougher than Thompson. But he never learned that the wild West was giving way to a country where a man could still be an individualist — but not bigger than the law!

action-packed novel

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor **Marie Antoinette Park, Asso. Ed.**

WESTERN ACTION, November, 1959, published every other month by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. Yearly subscription, $2.00; single copy 35c. Printed in the U. S. A.

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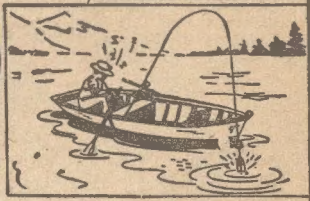

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THE FABULOUS BEN THOMPSON

by Harold Gluck

He was a hell-raiser and a no-good. He joined the Confederates during the ruckus between the states, and tried to turn it into Ben Thompson's private war. But that was only the beginning. And there are still oldtimers around who swear that there never was an outlaw or bad man tougher than Thompson!

THE YOUNG man standing at the bar sort of reminded you of Ben Thompson. Square-jawed, with black hair and blue eyes, he surveyed the other customers carefully. His gaze passed over those standing and the ones seated at tables.

"Just set up that bottle and I'll pay when finished," he told the bartender.

Then he unbuttoned his coat and a .45 single action Colt could be seen sticking in his trousers. "This town is going to see some action," he said softly.

And he was correct. Shades of Abilene, Dodge, Tombstone

The True Story Of A Bad Man

Thompson was always ready and eager for a brawl.

and other Western towns—there *was* going to be action! Somebody rushed to the phone booth. Within a matter of minutes, seven radio cars had the place surrounded; from all parts of the neighborhood the police converged. Our Hero faced some thirty officers of the law—and surrendered meekly, without even going for his gun.

The charge was technical and statutory: First—carrying a concealed weapon without the necessary pistol permit; second—announcing a breach of the Peace. But a kind-hearted judge could understand the plight of a sailor who had spent most of his days aboard a ship and, in his spare time, read a lot about the tough men of the West. Last I heard about our imitation Ben Thompson was that he was back sailing the high seas.

THE REAL Ben Thompson was *something*, in spite of the fact that you have a tough job separating the truth from the legends. And when the life of one Western lawman or gunslinger crosses the path of other famous men—like Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, or Bat Masterson—you have another difficult problem facing you. There are partisans on both sides and the versions of a given incident are miles apart.

"You should have seen the way Wyatt made Ben back down," you get from one source. "Ben didn't back down at all, especially when he had his guns," says another source.

And then you have another situation. Most of us want to get into print, but we're not all furnished writers. Even Daniel Boone is said to have dictated his memoirs to a man who gave them the necessary polish. Kit Carson also did some dictating. Ben Thompson was no exception.

Naturally Ben Thompson himself felt that the world should know about this man who could drink, gamble, love, hate, and shoot. The Honorable W. M. Walton, a prominent attorney of those fading days of the West, did the polishing. The slant is simple! If you hated Ben Thompson, then he was "low, cowardly and contemptible." If you liked him, one word did the trick—he was a "Texan," enough so that he

served in the Confederate Army.

THE YEAR in which he opened his eyes (and probably was nursed on a six-gun) was 1843. Some claim he was born in Yorkshire, England; others mention Lockhart, Texas. When in a friendly spirit, Ben would recount some of his adventures, and probably they did get better with each retelling. But still, he was a killer, and Bat Masterson, who owed his life to Thompson, did say that Ben was the most dangerous killer in the West. I still get a smile out of Emerson Hough's comment on Ben: "...a very perfect exemplar of the creed of the six-shooter."

Of his first killing, he was exceedingly proud; it sort of stamped him as a "gentleman." There were many things that made up a gentleman in those days of the early West. It wasn't necessarily book-learning or the way one spoke or dressed. A "gentleman" was invariably a man who would come to the aid of a woman in distress, and be ready to lay down his life if necessary.

It happened in New Orleans, which was the ideal city for anything to happen in those days. Ben Thompson was with a group of Creoles. One had a little too much liquor inside of him; then there was this young lady without an escort. An insulting remark was passed. Words ensued between Gentleman Ben Thompson, and a Creole, followed by a challenge to a duel.

"Suits me fine," grinned Ben. "We just use pistols at ten paces. Keep on firing until one of us is either dead or shot full of holes."

"Barbarous," was the reply. "A gentleman fights with swords. My seconds will make the arrangement."

BEN REALIZED that he wouldn't have a chance with those long thin blades, so he talked and talked. There was no backing out, but finally there was a compromise. They would use daggers and fight to the death in a dark room. According to the rules, Ben should have been killed; but he sent the other man to the next world. Then he had to run for his life. He got help,

put on a disguise, and managed to get back to Austin.

Then came the Civil War. Now that the centennial of the great secession approaches, there seems to be renewed interest in the conflict; the presses are certainly turning out a lot of books on the subject. Somebody might write a book entitled: *"Ben Thompson's Private War."* When he was eighteen he enlisted in the Confederate Army.

To be exact, the soldiers in the Confederate Army were busy fighting the soldiers in the Union Army; but Ben was busy doing his own private fighting and making money. He was with Baylor, Smith, and even went with Shelby. He ran gambling games and sold liquor to the soldiers. War or no war, he was going to make money and Heaven help anyone trying to get into his way.

ONE DAY at Fort Clark, a Sergeant made a mistake—though the facts were on the Sergeant's side.

"Private Ben Thompson, you have stolen rations. Each soldier is entitled to his share of rations. You are a thief. You will return the food at once."

What a thing to say! What else could Ben do? Then he had some words with an officer. Poor Lieutenant Haigler should have had this legend on his tombstone: *I argued with Ben Thompson.* That made one officer less in the Confederate Army.

Mexicans, of course didn't count. One day in a gambling house in Nuevo Laredo, there were two Mexicans in the game. Ben was winning, and it seemed to them he was cheating. They made a mistake—in Spanish; there was gunfire; they departed this earth. A chase followed, but Ben escaped.

In Austin, Ben got into an argument with one John Coombs; Coombs joined the list of those who made the fatal mistake. The war was over and there was more trouble. Ben was arrested by Union Military and managed to escape.

He crossed the border and joined those Ex-Confederates who were trying to bolster up the shaky Mexican Empire of poor Maximillian.

MAXIMILLIAN made three mistakes: First was to let Louis Napoleon talk him into the deal. Second was to refuse a completely-armed group of Confederate soldiers who might have turned the tide of war. Third was to refuse to shave off his well-trimmed beard and escape. So Emperor Maxmillian died before a firing squad and Ben Thompson went back to Texas. There he stood trial for the killing of John Coombs but was acquitted. He was free; but not for long. Seems he had been in a fight with Sam Brown. Brown lived and the charge was "assault with intent to kill." Ben went to trial, and figured he would soon be freed; but he spent two years behind bars.

When he came out he and his younger brother, Bill Thompson, sort of went together. They raised cain in all the towns; drank like fish; and gambled. When Ben came to Abilene he met his old friend, Phil Coe, from Austin. Phil was a "gentleman gambler." He was tall, good looking, and in those days men like him wore beards. In Austin, Phil Coe and Dave Bowes ran an "establishment"; it was there that Ben ran some of his own games.

So when the two met, they talked over old times and some new plans. Net result was that Abilene now had an establishment known as the Bull's Head Saloon, offering drinks, women, and gambling. What more could anyone ask? Alas, there was Wild Bill Hickok, who practically ran the town. Hickok has been so whitewashed in books for kids, and on TV programs, that it becomes hard to find out just who was the real Wild Bill.

HICKOK was in town, gambling, when the top boys were looking for a man with a reputation to keep things in hand. So Wild Bill got the job. He continued his gambling and also managed to get his "percentage."

There are two versions about the quarrel that led up to the killing of Phil Coe by Wild Bill. In one version, there was bad blood because Wild Bill demanded more than his "percentage" of the take. In the other version there was a woman.

Ben Thompson was not in town when the showdown took place. He had gone to Kansas City to meet the wife he had acquired. They went out for a drive in a buggy; it overturned and both were seriously hurt. Ben's leg was broken and his wife's arm so badly smashed that amputation was necessary. Ben learned of what took place from friends.

There was one of those frequent celebrations—a lot of drinking, making the rounds, and then some shooting. Phil Coe was with some of his Texan friends. Now much is made of the fact that Phil wasn't a man with a reputation when it came to gunslinging; Ben took care of that job. But Phil *did* carry a gun.

In one version, Phil and his friends were smashing windows, insulting women, and shooting off their guns. Wild Bill met them and undertook their arrest. Coe told Wild Bill that his arrest depended upon who was the better man, and at once drew his pistol.

McWilliams, Wild Bill's deputy, stepped up and tried to pacify Coe, and at the same time to secure his pistol. But Coe was anxious for a fight and fired at Wild Bill, missing his mark. Wild Bill returned the fire but at the moment he pulled the trigger of his pistol, Coe threw McWilliams in front of him. One of Coe's friends got into the fight and drew his gun and also fired at Hickok. Two shots came from Wild Bill's gun—and both men were dead.

THE OTHER version makes it almost cold-blooded murder. Wild Bill had warned the cowboys to be quieter; then he bought the drinks and went back to the Alamo. The celebration continued. Coe's party came to the Alamo, and in the street a pistol shot sounded. Hickok jumped to the door—by one account—with a Colt in each hand. Coe, from the sidewalk edge called that he had shot at a dog. But according to a pro-Hickok version, he lifted his pistol and Wild Bill fired at him. Coe's shot went wild and Wild Bill killed him. Yet the Texan version, as given by the men in Coe's party, has Coe replacing his gun after his first shot, and turning to face an empty-handed Hickok. Wild

Bill reproved Coe mildly for shooting inside town limits. The incident was ended; Coe turned away, and Wild Bill suddenly whipped a pair of derringers from coat pockets and shot Coe, then jumped back inside the saloon.

Coe then pulled his pistol and fired at Wild Bill but the bullet only hit the door. At this point, it is claimed McWilliams —or Mike Williams—came running out. Wild Bill fired again killing his own friend. There wasn't much they could do for Coe and he soon died. The body was taken back to Texas and en route, Ben Thompson learned the terrible news about his pal.

ABOUT A year later, Hickok had to visit Wichita, Kansas, on some private business. He made the trip on horseback and habit caused him to make his first stop in the place before a saloon. He entered and soon a stranger came up to him.

"Is your name Wild Bill?" he asked.

"That is what they call me," was the reply.

"Then take that," said the stranger, drawing a pistol and firing at Wild Bill. The muzzle of the pistol was so close that the flash burned Hickok's face and the shock of the bullet knocked him out. The stranger ran out, jumped on his horse, and headed south, figuring he had killed his man. But a revived Wild Bill was soon in pursuit; and when he caught up, there was a battle and the stranger was killed. Who was he? A cousin of Coe who wanted to avenge Phil's death.

THE PATHS of Ben Thompson and Bat Masterson cross and in a very peculiar way. At that time, Bat was drawing pay as a scout, with practically nothing to do. He found himself in Sweetwater. Bat liked Molly Brennan and she liked him. Then the villain appeared on the scene—Sergeant King of the Fourth Cavalry who felt he was as tough as they came.

Sergeant King wanted to show how tough he was, so he decided to go for Wyatt Earp—especially when he heard that this new lawman had said you couldn't carry your guns in Wichita. We have

an eye witness account of what took place from Charles Hatton, the city attorney.

"I came to Witchita to get that son-of-a-bitch," said King. "All I want is a sight of him."

And there you had it. King holding his six-shooter levelled at Wyatt Earp, whose own guns were in his holsters. But Wyatt never flinched; he walked straight up to King, took away his gun and then slapped his face. Then jerked away King's other gun. Net result was a fine of one hundred dollars with people chuckling at the result. But it had to have a definite end. King would have to kill somebody who stood in his way.

THAT SOMEBODY became Bat Masterson who wanted Molly. So into the Lady Gay came King. He shot at Bat and Molly threw her body into the line of fire and took the slug herself. The next shot got Bat. Young Masterson fired once, and King left this world. King's army pals were ready to finish off the wounded scout. But Ben Thompson was there, taking care of increasing his bankroll at the faro layout. He went into action.

"I'll kill the first one that tries anything," he warned. And since he held a gun in each hand. and already had his own reputation, they knew he meant it. And, strange as it seems, he even nursed the wounded Bat back to health.

The unwritten law in the West was that when a man saved your life you actually owed him a life. And there came a time when Ben had to ask Bat to save a life—that of his younger brother Bill; for Bill Thompson could also get into trouble when he was by himself. In this case there was a slight dispute with a citizen of Ogallala, Nebraska. When it was over, the respected man was a corpse and Bill was nursing a bullet-wound. He was thrown into the local clink; but since he was wounded they let him stay in a hotel room.

THE NEWS was brought to Ben that Bill would soon be at the end of a rope for killing a man. In fiction, Ben would saddle up his horse, run into town and save his brother. But the law in that town was also

looking for Ben, because he had had a little shooting affair there some years before.

"Save my brother," Ben pleaded to Bat.

A life for a life. Now Bat Masterson had a vivid imagination. Give him a lot of credit, for years later he was going to be one of our best known and beloved writers. What he did is worthy of any TV western show. He got together a small group of men. Some were his friends, and a few sympathetic to Bill.

"We got to get Bill out of town," he explained. "The midnight train will do the trick. You fellows start a fight in the dance hall. Everyone will go there to see what is happening; Bill's guard will play with us."

It worked according to script. The bullets started flying around the dance hall. Everyone—and that included extra guards at the hotel—rushed over to help. Bill was released from his room; he boarded the train and went to North Platte. There, Buffalo Bill got into the script by permitting Bill Thompson to rest and recover at his house. Later, Bat delivered Bill to Ben. The debt was now repaid.

IF YOU READ much about the life of Wild Bill Hickok you may come across a notation that he killed Bill Thompson. As a result, that you may be confused: If this is so, why didn't Ben go out and finish off Wild Bill? The answer is that there was another man named Bill Thompson—no relation to Ben.

Miguel Antonio Otero, who later became Governor of New Mexico describes this killing. He mentions it as a third killing and describes a man named Bill Thompson, with whom Hickok had had some difficulty of slight importance. Thompson was not a bad man or tough citizen. He was regarded as cowardly; consequently Wild Bill paid but slight heed to him. One day Wild Bill entered a restaurant and while giving his order to the waiter was surprised to see the waiter jump back. Hastily taking cognizance of the situation, Hickok saw Thompson not more than five paces away, with a pistol pointed at him.

He quickly slipped from his

chair to the floor, the bullet passing harmlessly through the space where his head had been a second before. Wild Bill had drawn his pistol as he slipped from the chair. And before Thompson could take a second shot Wild Bill's pistol rang out; Thompson dropped to the floor with a bullet through his brain.

PARTISANS of western gunmen and lawmen like to argue about whether a certain man made others back down. Did Ben Thompson ever back down? Or Wyatt Earp? Or Doc Holliday? Or Clay Allison? Or Billy-the-Kid? Or Wes Hardin? This can be a rather futile discussion unless you keep certain sensible facts in mind. A reputation of being able to shoot—and take care of yourself—was mighty important. There were small towns that looked around for a man who could keep the "undesirable element" in place. If you were outside the law, your shooting might put fear into the heart of citizens. If you were just a rancher with a lot at stake, the fact that you were mighty handy with a gun could save you a lot of trouble.

If two men faced each other in a situation that might lead to shooting, what was to be done? Our tough man finds himself face-to-face with a tenderfoot—unarmed and not scared. Is he to fill him full of lead? Or, having a little sense and perhaps some humor in his soul, does he let the incident pass? Is this backing down? Or if our expert finds himself suddenly facing the muzzle of a Colt, is he to draw or try to get out of the one-sided situation and live for another day? Is this backing down? What if our tough man finds himself in a situation where he may have to shoot it out with the sheriff and then become an outlaw? If he decides to live with the law, is this backing down?

SITUATIONS have to be carefully studied and analyzed before coming to a conclusion. Yet many people went to try to kill Wild Bill Hickok. Why? It has been pointed out that the reason why so many challenged Wild Bill may perhaps be explained by the nervous temper of those days. Whenever a man reached for his gun, Hickok shot him

through the head. Reaching for a gun was a universal, automatic, habitual, involuntary gesture.

Of course if a fellow wore a gun and didn't know how to use it, he was just a damn fool in those days.

Marshal George Bold related an incident of his early days to prove this point. As a young fresh, green kid he had come to Dodge and Bat Masterson gave him a helping hand. He brought with him a .22 short pistol from home. Bat took one look at that gun, broke it, threw the shells out of the window and then smashed the barrel of the gun on the edge of a counter.

"Why are you doing that?" protested young George. "That gun cost me seven dollars back in Indiana."

"Saving your life, kid," Bat Masterson said.

Later, George felt a bit lost without a gun. He wanted to know what he was going to do for a gun. Bat informed him that when he knew how to handle a gun—and not before—he would get one. Ben Daniels agreed and then uttered those famous words of western wisdom: "Out here, kid, when you wear a gun a man assumes you know how to use it. If you don't, God help you."

WE CAN NOW look at some of the situations in which Ben Thompson found himself. A story is told that, on one occasion, Ben Thompson met his match in the person of a young English remittance man playing cards with him. The remittance man thought he caught Thompson cheating and indiscreetly said so. Instantly Ben's .44 covered him. For some unknown reason, the gambler gave the youth a chance to get out of the situation.

"Take it back—and quick," he said grimly.

Every game in the house was suspended while all eyes turned on the dare-devil youth and the hard-faced gambler. The remittance man went white, half rose from his seat, and shoved his head across the table toward the revolver.

"Shoot and be damned. I say you cheat" he cried hoarsely.

Ben Thompson hesitated, laughed, shoved the revolver back into its holster, then or-

dered the youth out of the gambling place.

EDDIE FOY, the famous comedian, also came into contact with Ben Thompson. He was the town's favorite for several seasons and he wrote in his autobiography probably the best and shortest accurate description of Dodge: Dust, heat, and prairie, but above all, dust. He might have added: it also had Ben Thompson.

On that particular evening, Eddie Foy was busy with his make-up. He was seated at a table in a sort of makeshift dressing room. They used "double scenery" which meant that movable sets were painted, with one scene on one side and a different scene on the other. When turned with the flat side towards the stage, you could make a dressing room and get a bit of privacy. Suddenly Ben Thompson appeared on the stage. Taking one look at Eddie Foy, he gave an order.

"I want to shoot that light out. Move your head."

It was quite evident that inside of Ben Thompson was a good quantity of drink. The light came from an oil lamp on the table. What was Eddie Foy to do? The normal thing would be to move and pronto. But Eddie had some temperment in him; he just sat still and focused his eyes on Thompson.

Ben Thompson repeated his warning with an addition. It was o. k. with him if Eddie Foy wanted the bullet to go through his head. The actor realized he was being stubborn, and was sort of hypnotized by his own reaction. Maybe he was deadly scared but he was facing it out. Something was going to happen and it might be the pull of that trigger.

FORTUNATELY, Bat Masterson appeared on the stage and in a second took in the entire situation. He simply threw the muzzle of Ben's gun upward so that if a bullet were fired nothing would happen to Eddie Foy; then he managed to coax Ben Thompson off the stage. The actor always felt—when looking back at the incident—that Ben's intention was not to kill him but to scare him—to show him up as a weakling and a tenderfoot.

Eddie Foy made an interesting comment on all of these

gunslingers. He compared them to big game hunters, saying that a man accustomed to killing tigers would feel himself belittled if he were asked to go on a squirrel hunt. Man is the biggest game there is. And that a gunfighter, no matter whether he was on the right or wrong side of the law, took more pride in bagging the biggest of big game—another noted and dangerous gunfighter—than in bumping off a tenderfoot, or somebody not expert with a gun.

An incident takes place in Dodge City which, at that time, had no significance. It concerned Eddie Foy and another actor known for the records as C. Somehow C got the idea that Eddie Foy was showing attention to a girl C liked. Eddie Foy was bunking in a little one-room shack at the time. C took some pot shots at Eddie Foy, and fortunately missed. Wyatt Earp learned about this incident but didn't make an arrest. What is important is that C was ready to kill.

Now many years pass and there is a power in the Press—an editor named Charles Chapin: A man who could build careers for others and topple people to the very lowest depths of degradation and despair. Many came into contact with him at the old *New York World*. Later Charles Chapin kills his wife and is sentenced to jail. Warden Lawes gave him a chapter in his book *"20,000 Years in Sing Sing,"* and calls him The Rose Man; for, in his dying days, Charles Chapin took care of gardens which he planted in Sing Sing. But this very Charles Chapin happens to be Mr. C—who tried to kill Eddie Foy years before in Dodge City. Go figure that one out!

THERE ARE people who still think King Fisher was one of the most fabulous men of the old West. There was a public road and if you took it on horseback you came to a sign: *This is King Fisher's Road. Take the other one.* It was a road that led past his ranch, so he decided to make it his private road. As simple as that, when you consider he was as deadly a shot with his left hand as with his right one. He was a dude in his attire, but he did succeed in thumbing his

nose at the Texas Rangers and baffling them. He even wore a badge which he wore by forcing the scared county to appoint him deputy sheriff.

He had one advantage over Ben Thompson: Bottle for bottle, he could drink more and be sober. The two of them boarded a train for San Antonio. Ben took out his six-shooter and threatened to kill the scared porter; this was not to the liking of King Fisher.

"Shut up and don't make such a damn fool out of yourself here," snapped Fisher.

Ben Thompson was in no mood to be told what to do, especially since he still had his six-shooter handy. "And if I don't," he retorted. "Whose going to make me?"

"I will, even if I have to shoot you," replied King Fisher. "So quiet down."

"I guess you would," said a tired Ben Thompson.

And so they sat side by side. They didn't know it, but both had an appointment with Death. What happened? Well we'll see that a bit later.

THERE WAS a period when Ben Thompson and his brother Bill ran their gambling interests in Ellsworth at the Grand Central. Again you face a lot of conflicting reports and records on the situation. There are those who say that Ben had Ellsworth treed and ran it for his own interest—and those of the cowboys from Texas way, who wanted to enjoy themselves without interference from the law. Then there are those who claim the "law" also had a direct financial interest in what they did. The whole group of fighting "lawmen"—which included the Earp brothers, Doc Holliday, Luke Short, and Bat Masterson were called by some "The Fighting Pimps."

As the Texan cowboys were heading for Ellsworth, the authorities began to take measures to hire some gunmen to carry badges.

There included such men as Brocky Jack Norton, Happy Jack Morco, Ed Crawford, Charlie Brown, and others. Sheriff Whitney was a good man—but not with a gun, likewise his deputy, John Hogue. Wyatt Earp happened to be in town when all the trouble started.

The day is August 18, and the year 1873. Somebody gets slapped. Seems John Sterling slapped Bill Thompson's face. Or it was Martin who slapped Ben Thompson's face. Maybe both faces got slapped. Why no six-shooters drawn from the holsters? The two gambling brothers were for the moment keeping within the law—and didn't have their gun belts on them. But the trouble has started. So Bill gets a shotgun and Ben a rifle. Sheriff Whitney appears on the scene.

"Take it easy," he suggests. "Cool down a little."

"Keep out of this, Sheriff," warns Ben. "We don't want you to get hurt."

ARMED MEN are now in the street. But what is the issue? Is it between the "South" and the "North"? Between cowboys who want their way and others who say *No?* Or are pent-up hatreds coming to the surface. The shooting begins. First casualty is poor Sheriff Whitney, who goes down with a load of shot from that gun. But who shot him? Ben has a rifle. But the reports claim—and they hold—that Bill shot him. Wyatt Earp holds up the wounded law officer.

"I'm finished," he manages to say. "Get me back home."

Bill Thompson is worried. He turns to his brother Ben for advice.

"Get out of town and pronto. I'll take care of things."

So Bill gets some more armament and a horse. It is claimed that before he left town he gave his shotgun to Ben, and in turn took the rifle. Maybe it is this so-called switch that has caused some of the confusion about who first held the shotgun.

Now there is a posse out to arrest Ben Thompson, but he and his friends are ready for trouble. Ben refuses to submit to arrest or give up his guns. He figured he would be "gunned down" in no time.

THE VERSION with Wyatt Earp is really dramatic. The Mayor of poor Ellsworth is heartbroken; his gunfighters have turned chicken. He takes the badge off the shirt of Brocky Jack Norton and gives it to Earp because that young man has passed a remark that

he would take care of things—if they were his business. He is unarmed.

"Get some guns," says the Mayor with hope in his heart. "I order you to arrest Ben Thompson."

You see Wyatt Earp going into the store, buying a pair of second hand six-shooters, with holsters and cartridge belt. He buckles on the belt. He tests his guns and is now ready for action. Out he walks and perhaps into certain death from the shotgun that Ben Thompson is carrying.

"What do you want, Wyatt?" demands Ben.

"To arrest you," are the words coming from his mouth.

In this version, Ben hands his shotgun to Wyatt, who then unbuckles Ben's gunbelt and marches him to court. Ben is fined the sum of twenty-five dollars; then he gets back his guns. Later poor brother Bill will be extradited, stand trial for the murder of Sheriff Whitney, and be acquitted. If what happened—if it did happen—doesn't make much sense, I agree. Because if Ben killed Wyatt he would still be able to get out of town alive. But if Wyatt killed Ben, he would have been killed on the spot.

IF YOU WANT to make a list of the ten greatest shooting incidents in the West, then you have to put the shooting of Jack Harris by Ben Thompson high on that list. Ben was very sober that day, which may help explain this remarkable piece of firearms display. It happened in San Antonio. Harris was behind a door, so Ben fired the fatal bullet onto a wall; it ricocheted into his target—and entered Jack Harris' heart. This was no fluke. In Austin, a bartender took a shot at Ben, and ducked behind the bar. Ben quickly calculated the position of his attacker, then sent a bullet through the wood panel squarely into the bartender's head. Once a man took refuge behind a post in Austin and attempted to shoot Ben. All Ben could see was a little of his face and one ear sticking out beyond the post.

"I'm going to mark you," he shouted.

Then he pulled the trigger and sent the bullet neatly through the man's ear.

Nor did Ben Thompson need

any encouragement to make another man's fight his own, as the Burdette affair proved. Jim Burdette was a gambler who got a terrific whipping from Mark Wilson, who ran a variety show.

"Don't you or any of your gang try anything here again," warned Wilson.

BEN THOMPSON heard about this and "adopted" the cause. He sent a negro to the show with orders to start trouble by yelling. This was done, and Wilson came out to quell the disturber. He took one look at Ben Thompson—with a six-gun in each hand—and vanished among the scenery. Death took a holiday—or time out, rather, because Ben wasn't going to let Wilson stay alive much longer. He went to Jim Burdette.

"Here is a box of lampblack. You go to Wilson's place, throw it in his face. And don't worry about what's going to happen; I'll take care of things."

It was a carefully planned murder. The gambler followed instructions. A maddened Wilson went for his shotgun. Ben went down on the floor as the contents of the gun passed over his head; then he arose and his six-shooter went into action. With all those slugs in him, Wilson became a corpse. His bartender fired at Ben and missed. The bartender managed to remain alive for a few weeks but then died.

Ben had enough of his friends around to swear to the terrible attack on himself. He was acquitted—and then a fantastic thing happened. Ben announces he is reforming: no more drink and no more gambling; he will be a different man from now on. And so the City of Austin learns that Ben Thompson is a candidate for City Marshal.

WHEN THE ballots were counted, Ben didn't get the job, and to show his anger, he at once forgot his pledges. He buckled on his gunbelt and did a little shooting. The saloon he had sold got some of the slugs; so did another gambling house; some sporting goods stores; the newspaper; and even the police station. When some sense came back into his head, Ben went to the railroad

station. And for a dramatic exit—he sat on the cowcatcher of the outgoing locomotive!

Maybe Austin missed this "colorful" killer. On his return, he again asked the city to give him the job and this time he was elected.

His escapades have become legends. Once he went to the worst place in Texas, which at that time was the town of Luling. Perhaps towns liked to compete for the title of: "Worst place in Texas." Rowdy Joe was the big shot there and he definitely ran the toughest dance place and bounced out the other tough men. There was cash on the gambling tables, which he stuffed into his pockets and walked out unharmed.

ONCE BEN was informed that a charge against him was on the docket in the county court. He mounted his horse, rode up to the building—and right inside. He smiled to the judge and the other astonished court officials.

"They say that there's a charge against me. I say there isn't. Am I correct?"

The clerk looked at the bewildered judge and then used his head. "No charge on the docket against you, Mr. Thompson."

At the leading hotel in Austin, a convention of cattlemen was being held. Seems they forgot to invite the local congressman who was a friend of Ben. This insult could neither be overlooked nor forgiven. With a gun in each hand he entered the dining hall and shot up the dishes. Those cattlemen were no milk-fed babies; they were tough ranchers—and yet they took it; Ben Thompson's reputation was too much for them.

But time was running out for Ben as it had been doing for others like him. His own personal tragedy was that he couldn't see conditions changing. The West no longer had any use for a man like him—nor any need tolerate him. Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp—just to mention two others—make the change and live a different kind of life. And so Ben Thompson and King Fisher have an appointment with Death.

SOME OF the newspaper accounts of the incident are highly emotional and there are

missing facts. Some say that Ben Thompson, after killing Harris, had announced he was going to liquidate the man's two partners, Foster and Simms. Ben and King Fisher went to the Variety Theatre together. According to the story of Billy Simms, he was deadly afraid of killer Ben Thompson. Simms wanted protection. He went to his City Marshal and produced a telegram sent to him by a friend, warning that Ben was on his way to kill him. The City Marshal—and even the sheriff—pointed out they could do nothing until Ben made some overt act. Small comfort to Simms, who wanted to remain alive.

The four main characters are soon facing each other—Thompson, Fisher, Simms, and Foster. When the shooting was all over, Thompson and Fisher are dead. Foster dies within two weeks.

THE CORONER'S jury brought in the following verdict:

"...that Ben Thompson and J. K. Fisher both came to their deaths on the eleventh day of March, 1884, while at the Vaudeville Theatre in San Antonio, Texas from the effects of pistol shot wounds from pistols held in and fired from the hands of J. C. Foster and Jacob S. Coy, and we further find that the said killings were justifiable and done in self-defense in the immediate danger of life."

Bill Thompson was a bit too late to save his brother's life. He rushed in when most of the shooting was over. Simms raised his gun to kill him, but the City Marshal, Phil Shardein, threw his own body in front of Bill, shouting, "I got him. Don't shoot!" Bill Thompson claimed that his brother and Fisher were killed by people in the boxes or behind the scenes. That they also had been hired to do this. One newspaper took up this theme and said, "Ben Thompson was murdered in San Antonio and that city is welcome to all the glory of such a brutal and cowardly assassination."

They gave Ben a big funeral and sent the corpse of Fisher back to his ranch. A period was coming to an end. A man still could be an individualist—but not a law unto himself.

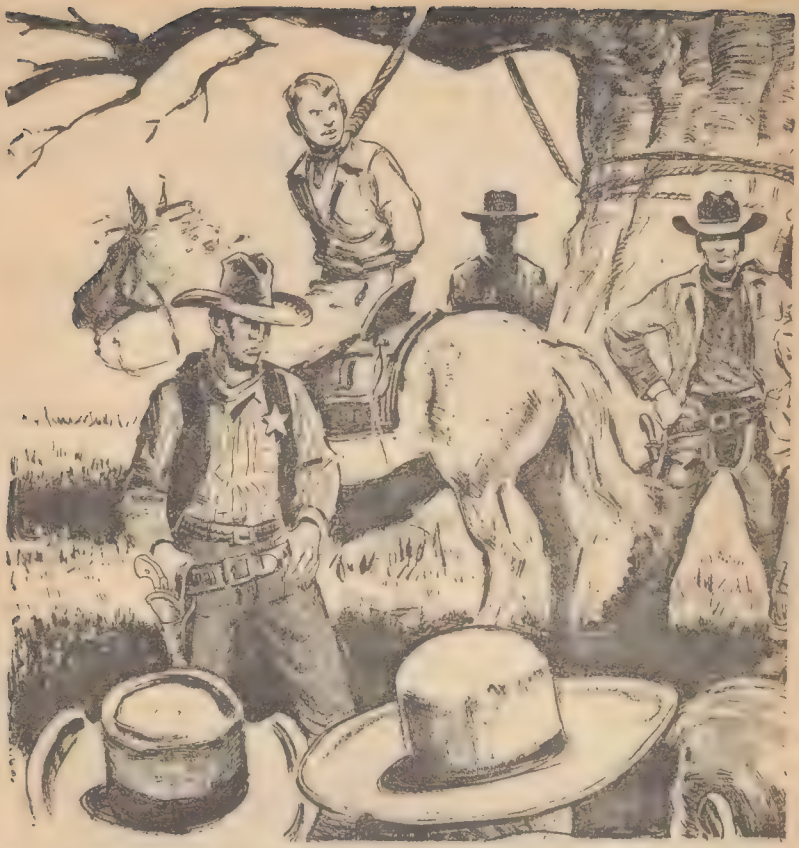
THE BATTLE OF CAMPHOR HILL

by Vern Hanson

Thrilling Novelet

Everyone in Camphor Hill was afraid to talk to Mick Fenner — afraid to tell him that his brother had been lynched for killing in self-defense. Everyone except those who planned to frame Mick into a hang-rope, too.

IT WAS somnolent noon when Mick Fenner rode through Main Street, Camphor Hill. The sun beat down on him, and on his rawboned brown mare picking her way gingerly among the cart-ruts. Mick waved a hand to an old man on the boardwalk. The old-timer saluted him hurriedly and disappeared into a barbershop. Mick frowned.



Everyone believed that the deputy was right in there with the lynchers, and helped them.

He saw Don Matthews and the Doc seemed to see him, too, but did not pause before hurrying into his surgery. Mick's frown became a scowl. A fine homecoming! What was the matter with people—did they think he had contracted the plague or somethin' on his travels?

Folks seemed to be watching him queerly. Folks he knew and others he didn't remember having seen before. They seemed

to be eyeing him and talking about him, turning away when he looked at them, remembering suddenly urgent business. Old friends hurried away at his approach.

What ailed everybody? Mick wanted to raise in his stirrups and holler out that question.

But he continued silently on, looking straight in front of him now, not moving his head until he dismounted before the old frame house where he was born.

The front lawn was as green and lush as ever, though it badly needed cutting. As he strode up the gravel path, the white curtained windows seemed to watch him but there was no sign of life. Mick grinned, all his doubts gone. The house looked the same as ever. He didn't expect there'd be anybody in—George would be down at the stores this time of day. Or maybe not. It was around lunchtime; perhaps he was inside there now, eating, making himself redder and rounder than ever.

HE TRIED the front door and found it locked. Whistling through his teeth, he walked round the back. His high-heeled boots thudded on the board verandah. The frame door opened at his touch.

The kitchen looked desolate, as if it hadn't been used for a long time. No smell of cooking. Well, probably George had his meals out. It would be lonely for him in the house. Mick put two fingers to his lips and whistled—one long, one short. If George was in he'd recognize that all right.

There was no answering whistle or call. Mick passed through the house, from room to room, upstairs and down. It was empty, dusty, very cold after the noonday heat outside. It gave the appearance of an "unlived-in" house. As if George had gotten everything nice and tidy and then just walked out and left. A week or so ago, too, judging by the dust.

Mick was a little puzzled, but not worried; maybe George had gone on a trip. He'd ask down at Mackton's General Stores. Perce Mackton was George's best friend: he'd know.

He retraced his steps. He left his horse at the gate and walked the little way down the street to the stores. This was the

quieter end of town, away from the livery, the eating-joints and the honky-tonks. He passed nobody.

PERCE WAS alone behind the counter when Mick entered. Mick saw his bent bald head first; then Perce looked up and his sleepy eyes popped open, his mouth too. His articulation of Mick's name was a mere croak.

Mick's doubts returned. He wasted no time. "Where's George?" he said.

"How are you, Mick?... Long time... Sit down... Be right with yuh." Perce's words were a gabble. He made as if to come round the counter then changed his mind and returned to his original position.

His plump round face was furrowed, his eyes puckered; his mouth trembled as if he were about to burst into tears.

"What's the matter with you, Perce?" burst out Mick. "I ain't a ghost. I've come back for a piece. I jest want to know where George is."

"Mick, my boy..." Perce gulped.

Mick's anxiety made him savage. He snarled, "Where's George? What's happened to him? If anything has, for Pete's sake tell me. I'm not a kid..."

"Bad news..."

Perce broke off as Mick sprang round the counter and grabbed his arm. "Out with it!"

The words came out in a spurt. "George's dead, Mick—a fortnight ago."

Mick let go his arm. "So that's it; that's why all my old friends avoided me."

"I guess none of 'em wanted to be the one to tell yuh," said Perce. His face was smoother now; he seemed relieved.

MICK'S FACE had hardly changed; it had gone a little bleaker that was all. A stranger would not have noticed it, but Perce did. The old Fenner spirit. He might've known that Mick, the youngest and now the last of the clan, would take it like that. But he had not heard the worst yet. Perce steeled himself for the inevitable question. It came.

"How did he die?"

Perce licked dry lips. His face was furrowed again. His voice was little more than a husky whisper when he said: "He was lynched."

Mick's eyes widened; he swayed a little. His hand shot out and grasped Perce's shoulder, "What are you tellin' me? Who? Why?"

Perce winced. "Take it easy, Mick."

Mick let him go. Perce said: "George had a run-in with a gambler down at the Golden Buck an' he shot and killed him. It was self-defence. But a mob from there went after him; they hung him on the old cottonwood at the end of the street."

Mick's eyes were half-closed, veiling their pain. He remembered the old cottonwood. He had seen a man hanged there once when he was a kid. He stifled the grief and rage that filled him like a raging fire, forcing himself to be calm, to get things straight.

"Who were they? Who was the ringleader?"

"We can't find out. It was the usual mob from down there. When we got there—the old bunch: Doc, Jeb Porter, Mackey, Stiler, myself—it was too late. We cut him down. We buried him next to your Maw and Paw."

MICK WAVED this aside. No time for grief and sentiment, he wanted cold facts. "What was Sheriff Barrows doin'?"

"Barrows left town jest after you did. Dill Pattison's sheriff now."

"Who's he?"

"He's a sharpshooter. Uster be a U. S. Marshal. He couldn't do nothin' though; he couldn't put the finger on nobody. There were too many of 'em."

"Wal, what was Bat Millet doin'? I never liked him, but I didn't think he'd be the sort to let a lynch-mob form in his place. Why didn't he give the alarm?"

"Bat Millet left town two-three months ago. The Golden Buck's owned by a hombre named Luke Polloi now."

"There's been quite a few changes while I've been away," said Mick grimly.

"Yeh," said Perce. He hastened to add: "Polloi built himself a ranch a few miles out too. He's got some tough gunnies workin' for him. A lot of 'em spend their nights in town . . ."

"An' it was them fixed George?"

"Yeh, I guess they had a lot

to do with it. The gambler who George killed was one o' the mob."

Mick went back round the counter. He hitched up his gunbelt with a significant gesture. "Wal, I guess I'll mosey along an' have a look at the Golden Buck."

Perce caught him at the door, grasped his arm. "Don't start anythin', Mick. You'll only get yourself shot to pieces. That won't do any good. I'm with you in whatever you want to do. But wait awhile."

Mick moved the clutching hand gently away. "All right, Perce. I'll jest feel around a bit. I promise I won't start nothing—yet."

II

PERCE HAD seemed scared. Mick wondered why; it wasn't like Perce to be scared of anything. He thought about this Luke Polloi and this new sheriff, the ex-marshal. He wondered if they had anything to do with Perce being scared. There might be lots of other people, too, that Perce hadn't told him about, all contributing to the something that made Perce scared. If he *was* scared. Or maybe he wasn't scared for himself; maybe he was scared for somebody else.

Mick had watched him closely, listening for every subtle inflection of his voice, deciding that Perce definitely did not like Polloi but wasn't sure about the sheriff. Maybe the sheriff was a bit of an enigma. He almost turned back to pump Perce some more, but decided against it.

He halted outside the Golden Buck, noting that it was newly-painted, the old weather-beaten sign he remembered replaced by a larger garish new one. It seemed as if this Polloi jasper had put some money into the business.

He crossed the boardwalk in strides, looking neither right nor left, breasting the batwings, thrusting into darkness after the glare. He sauntered across the floor, thumb hooked in belt, glancing around nonchalantly until dark shapes became tangible things. The saloon was pretty full. There were plenty of people at the tables, eating as well as drinking, but the bar was not crowded. Mick found

himself plenty of elbow room. He had not seen anyone he knew. The barman was another stranger. A little squint-eyed cuss.

"Straight rye," Mick told him.

The barman grinned, showing two discolored teeth with a wide gap between. He went.

MICK HALF-TURNED, one foot on the brass rail. One elbow on the bar, the hand dangling conveniently near the butt of his gun. But nobody seemed to be paying him much attention.

The barman came back with the whiskey. Mick tossed a bill on the bar. "How can I get to see Luke Polloi?"

The barman flicked a duster across the bar. "Polloi's outa town right now. If you leave your name I'll tell him you called."

"No matter," said Mick. "I can call again."

The man polished the bar assiduously, wiping an imaginary spot by Mick's glass. He looked up to find Mick eyeing him coldly. He tucked the duster under his arm and went.

Mick finished his drink and went back to the empty house, began to search for something, anything... That night he slept there.

His sleep was troubled. Two shots from outside made him spring from his bed, wide awake and alert in an instant. He pulled on trousers and boots, donned his gun-belt. He left the house, went down the path in the moonlight. A huddled form lay by the gate; a shadow moved across the road; moonlight glinted on cold steel. Mick fired twice. The shadows parted and broke, a figure stumbled and ran. Mick fired again and followed. Horses hooves clattered; the sound rapidly faded.

MICK RETURNED to the gate and turned the body over so that the moonlight shone on the old, drawn face, the staring blue eyes.

"Doc Matthews," he breathed.

A voice said: "All right, bozo. Let go of your gun and stand up. Elevate your paws."

Mick left his gun on the ground. He rose and turned, raising his hands slowly.

"Gently. Don't try any

tricks." The voice belonged to a tallish, bulky man in a wide-brimmed Mexican sombrero. He had a gun in each hand. Mick had a diffused glimpse of an evil-looking bloated face. The moonlight shone on the silver star at the man's breast.

"You're the sheriff?"

"No, I'm his deputy... C'mon, get moving before the mob gets here. I don't want a lynching on my hands, an' I'll blow a hole in yuh if you make a false move—make no mistake about that."

A neat frame, figured Mick. First George, then Doc. Was he to be the third? And why? What was the meaning of it all; what menace hung over Camphor Hill; what was the meaning of the doubt and apprehension in the eyes of his old friends?

* * *

JUDGE PRESCOTT sat in his swivel chair, his hands folded over his stomach, his sleepy eyes half-closed. Opposite him, on the other side of the desk, sat Perce Mackton. Perce was leaning forward in his chair. The morning sunlight streaming through the window played on his intense, furrowed round face.

"We gotta do somethin', Judge," Mackton said. "We can't leave young Mick there. You know what'll happen tonight if somethin' ain't done."

The Judge made his decision. "All right," he said. The chair creaked as he slowly lifted his ponderous bulk from it. He seemed loath to rouse himself; but Perce, who knew his judge of old, was mentally patting himself on the back.

The door of the sheriff's office was locked.

"They're probably skulking inside, not takin' chances," said Perce.

The Judge raised both his huge fists and hammered on the door. There was a scuffle inside, the sound of bolts being withdrawn, the door was opened a crack and the barrel of a gun was poked through.

"Put that away," growled the Judge.

The door swung open. Clem Barton, the bulky deputy stood in the aperture. He lowered his gun rather sheepishly. The Judge and Perce brushed past him.

Sheriff Dill Pattison rose from behind his desk, put down the gun he had been holding. He was beady-eyed, obese, oily; not huge like the judge, but flabby like a fat slug.

His face creased in an oily smile. "Judge—Perce," he greeted them. "What ails you?"

"We've come to get young Mick Fenner out of here," the judge told him.

FOR A MOMENT Pattison was taken aback by this forthright approach. Then he said: "The younker's in for murder, Judge. Clem caught him standin' over the body with a smokin' gun in his hand."

"We know all that," said the judge. "But we know Mick didn't kill the Doc; Matthews was one of his best friends. There must've been somebody else there."

"Wa-al," said the sheriff slowly. "The younker said he fired at somebody who was runnin' away, but Clem didn't see anybody. He heard the shots an' ran there an' found the younker like I told you. The Doc had got two slugs in him. There'd been three fired from the younker's gun. He must've missed once. The slugs out o' the body came from a forty-five, same as the one the younker carried."

"Clem must've been pretty slick to be on the scene o' the crime right away," said the judge. "Seems like he might've been hanging around for some reason or other."

"I was just having a stroll," mumbled Clem.

"He was just having a stroll," mimicked the judge.

Perce Mackton kept silent; he could not hope to compete with the judge's high-handedness. He wondered why Sheriff Pattison stood for it. After all, Pattison was the law in Camphor Hill, whereas the judge had not practised for years. The sheriff seemed a pretty weak character for an ex-marshal.

THE JUDGE was facing the deputy now. "I suppose you didn't try to find anybody else, Clem. The man who ran away, maybe; a wounded man maybe."

"I don't get yuh, Judge."

"No? Wal, Perce here tells me there were bloodspots along

the road past the Fenner house."

"We haven't seen 'em," said the sheriff. "Why wasn't I told about this?"

"We're telling you now. Although I daresay some kind well-wisher has already washed them away."

"Anybody could've made 'em," said the sheriff. "They don't prove nothin'."

"Maybe they don't. But I figure that young Mick shot at the Doc's killer an' hit him... An' there's a certain gent walking around town right now with his arm in a sling. They're that sure of themselves."

"Aw, you mean Buzz Emmings," said the deputy. "He caught his arm in the door of the barbershop."

The Judge's smile was not pretty. "Oh, so the barber's in this, too, is he?"

The sheriff broke in, drawing himself up indignantly. "You're makin' some wild accusations, Judge. You're also questionin' my integrity. I'm the law in this town an' I aim to keep the peace..."

"Blether," cut in the Judge. "Have you got the slugs that were dug out of the Doc's body?"

The sheriff looked puzzled, he could not keep pace with his opponent's sudden changes of mood. "Yeah."

"Let's have a look at 'em."

THE SHERIFF hesitated a moment, then he opened the drawer of his desk. He tossed the two bullets on its top.

The Judge picked them up, held them in his palm and scrutinized them closely.

"Gimme young Mick's gun," he said after a moment.

"This is highly irregular, Judge." The sheriff was far from sure of himself.

"I know all that legal jargon," mumbled the Judge; "gimme the gun."

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders, delved in the drawer again and brought forth a Colt .45.

The Judge took it in his huge hands; he spun the cylinder. "Three," he growled.

The gun went off in his hand. Clem, who was standing beside him, cursed and went for his iron.

"Hold it, you fool." The

Judge smiled blandly. "Hair trigger," he said.

The sheriff had turned and was looking at the jamb of the door behind him, where the bullet had penetrated. Beyond there were the cells.

The Judge crossed to his side. "Got a knife?"

Silently the sheriff handed him a jackknife from the drawer. His hand shook.

THE JUDGE placed the gun on the desk. Then he prized the slug from the door jamb. He held it between thumb and finger, rolling it, as he peered.

He held it out to the sheriff. "See that mark scored down the side?"

The sheriff squinted. "Yeah ...yeah, I see it."

"It's perfectly smooth except for that mark, isn't it?"

"Er—yeah."

The Judge opened his other hand, disclosing the two slugs that had been taken from Doc Matthews' body. "Now look at these. They're scored faintly both sides. Different kinds o' markings altogether. No two guns make the same mark—that's elementary ballistics, sheriff."

"Yeah," said Pattison doubtfully.

The Judge continued. "This proves the bullets that killed the Doc weren't fired from this gun of Mick Fenner's..."

Suddenly he raised his voice, banged his huge fist on the desk till it rattled. The sheriff stepped back a pace and almost fell over his chair.

"I demand you set young Fenner free. You haven't got an atom o' proof, except the word of this hombre here," he jerked a thumb at the deputy, "that he found the younker standing over the body. It's obvious the younker's story was true."

"But, Judge," protested Pattison weakly. "I can't let him go like that."

"Why not? You haven't got a shred of evidence."

"I gotta wait till Judge Miller gets here from Balltown."

"Judge Miller," the other man made as if to spit. He thrust a stubby finger at the sheriff. "I'm telling you if that kid isn't let loose there'll be ructions; he's been framed and you know it!"

III

NIGHTFALL again. In his cell, Mick Fenner sat motionless on the bunk. He was bent over, his face sunk in his hands.

Deputy Clem Barton came along the corridor and stopped outside the cell-door. On a tray he had coffee and beans. He peered into the cell, smirking as he saw the dejected prisoner. This young Fenner didn't seem such a hell-raiser after all. He opened the door with his key and entered the cell. He hooked the key-ring on his belt, balanced the tray in one hand, and drew his gun.

"Here you are," he said.

Mick looked up, his eyes half-closed.

He mumbled something and flipped his hand at the floor. The deputy bent to place the tray there. His gun was pointed at Mick but for a moment his eyes were on his task.

Mick's foot shot out, connecting, with a crack to the other's jaw. Clem gave a strangled grunt, straightened up from the force of the blow, then went over backwards. He fell flat, his feet catching the tray of food and propelling it, with a clatter, under the bunk.

Mick scooped up the gun and ran to the door. Sheriff Pattison, alarmed by the crash, was just opening the door at the end of the passage. His gun was in his hand.

"Hold it," rasped Mick. "Elevate that gun an' you're a dead skunk."

THE SHERIFF'S eyes widened, he let go of the gun as if it were red-hot. It clanged on the concrete floor.

"Come on along here," Mick said, his face a grim mask.

He stepped aside and, as the sheriff lurched past him, hit him across the side of the head with the barrel of the gun. The fat man was propelled into the cell and fell spreadeagled, his face against his deputy's side. Mick locked them in.

He ran down the passage, through the door and into the office. From the armory rack he selected a wicked-looking sawed-off shotgun and two boxes of slugs. He tucked Clem's forty-five in his belt, crammed the slugs in his pants pocket and, with the shotgun in his hand, ran to the door. He

shot the bolt back, opened the door, looked out. From down the street came the sounds of revelry; up this end all was quiet.

Mick closed the door behind him. He ran along the boardwalk keeping close to the dark fronts of the cabins and shops; he ran away from the sounds of revelry. He reached a certain point, paused, then darted across the road.

Hooves thudded down the street and Mick flattened himself against the front of Mackton's General Stores. The horsemen passed, riding hard.

Mick waited a moment then ran along the boardwalk and turned into the dark maw of the alley that ran alongside the Stores. He rapped on the side-door and waited.

The door opened. A girl stood in the light.

"Hallo, Jean," said Mick.

She cried out his name. He brushed past her and she closed the door, then turned to face him. She was tall and shapely in a white shirtwaist and brown skirt. The light gleamed on her mass of reddish-gold hair.

She was prettier than ever, reflected Mick. He said: "Where's your Dad?"

"Who's that?" It was Perce's voice from in back.

He came through the door from the kitchen. His eyes widened. *"Mick!"* It was almost a shout. "Quick! In here!"

* * *

OVER IN the jail, Sheriff Dill Pattison stirred and groaned. For once his thick-headedness had been an asset. He rose to his knees, scrabbling with thick fingers at the concrete floor.

He rose, shaking his head, stumbled forward and fell again over the recumbent body of his deputy. His clutching hands grasped the edge of the bunk and he held on. Slowly he drew himself up. Above him was the barred window. He yelled.

"Help! Help!" Then, as the full enormity of his plight and embarrassment occurred to him, he yelled again, savagely.

He listened. From the honky-tonks down the street came the murmur of voices, rising and falling, broken now and then by a voice yelling a song and the clankety-clank of a pounded piano.

The sheriff climbed on to the bunk, shoved his face against the bars of the window and yelled again. Then he got down and bent over his deputy and began to shake him. But Clem was out to the world: judging by the bruised, lopsided look of his face, the sheriff figured his deputy's jaw might be broken.

He straightened up and yelled again as he heard voices nearby. There were answering cries. He heard the men clattering through his office and pretty soon they were in the passage, clamouring questions...

"Where're the keys?"

"Fenner took 'em with him. Put a bullet in the lock."

"All right. Stand clear."

The report reverberated in the enclosed space. The door flew open.

The sheriff blundered out like an enraged buffalo. "See to Clem, some of yuh," he said. "I'm gonna rustle up a posse an' go after that young hellion."

* * *

A PERSISTENT thudding noise was haunting Judge Prescott's slumber. He grunted irritably; the bed creaked agonizingly as he rolled over. But the sound would not let him be. It became louder and there was a voice calling.

The Judge raised himself on his elbow and listened. In an instant he became alert. He bounded out of bed, his feet thudding on the floor with a force that seemed to shake the house.

Still in his voluminous nightshirt, he ran downstairs and opened the door. Perce Mackton slipped inside. "Mick Fenner's broken out o' jail," he panted. "He's been to my place."

"The young fool," said the judge. "If he had hung on a bit longer I think the sheriff would've broken an' let him out... Where is he now?"

"He's gone to the Golden Buck; he's lookin' for Polloi an' Buzz Emming."

"How did he know about Buzz Emming?"

"I told him Buzz had been walking around with his arm in a sling an' a lot of us thought he'd shot Doc. He got it out o' me, Judge. I guess I ought've kept my mouth shut. I never figured he'd..."

"It's done now," said the Judge. "He'd got to know I guess." He was dressing himself swiftly. "I guess we'd better get . . ." He broke off. "Listen." There was the sound of shouting voices outside, tramping feet coming nearer.

"I guess the sheriff's gotten loose," said Perce. "Mick locked him in a cell."

The judge's face relaxed into a smile. "They're coming here," he said. "You'd best get out of sight, Perce. In the back!"

AS PERCE went through the communicating door the callers knocked outside. Judge Prescott opened the door.

"What's all the ruckus about?" he boomed . . . "Oh, it's you, Sheriff."

"Is that Fenner kid here? He's busted out o' jail!"

"How come?"

The lawman gave a garbled account of Mick's escapade.

"He's dangerous, Judge. He's a killer. He's gotta be caught."

"Well, I haven't got him here," the Judge said. He peered at the dimly-seen men behind the sheriff and raised his voice. "But I'm coming out right now to see that an innocent boy doesn't fall victim to a lynching-party. I proved conclusively to the sheriff this morning that Mick Fenner could not possibly have shot the Doc. Ask the sheriff to tell you about it." With this he stepped back and slammed the door in their faces.

Only Judge Prescott in Camphor Hill could have gotten away with such behaviour to such a crew. They argued and shouted angrily but after a moment made off. The judge called Perce.

"Sounds like they're going to the Golden Buck. We'd better make our way there under cover. If that mob catches Mick they're liable to tear him to pieces. Most of them don't *want* to think him innocent. I . . ." he paused suddenly and stood perfectly immobile, his powerful fleshy face wrinkled.

Perce waited. Finally the Judge said: "I've got a better idea. *I'll* go to the Golden Buck. And I'd like you to go round quietly to the old gang—all the straight townsfolk we can depend on—and bring 'em here."

Perce looked very worried. "I'd like to go an' fetch Jean first. It ain't safe for her to be

all alone back there at the Stores. I got particular reason to know it ain't safe... It's—it's a purty complicated story an' it all leads up to why George Fenner was lynched an' Doc Matthews shot. I guess I ain't got time to tell it now..."

The Judge asked no questions. "All right," he said.

IV

THE GOLDEN BUCK Saloon was packed by a chattering mob. Gambling was suspended for the night and even drinking was lax; everybody was talking about Doc Matthews' murder and the escape of his alleged killer. A few ventured to remark that maybe the younker was innocent—him and Doc had been pals time back—but they were howled down by others, many of whom had tasted blood on another quite recent occasion and were mentally licking their lips in anticipation of further such enjoyment.

A few pessimists figured the younker must have stolen a horse by now and was well away. And the sheriff hadn't even sent a posse out; he was still up there chinwagging with Polloi.

"Here they come," said somebody.

All eyes turned upward to the balcony where the sheriff and Luke Polloi had just taken their stand. Beside the obese bulk of the other man Polloi looked a mere stripling: a wiry, yellow, lean-faced monkey of a man with brilliantly evil eyes and a pencilled moustache.

But he was the brains and the voice. It was he who raised his hands for silence, and he got it. Then he began to speak.

* * *

Back in the room that Polloi and the sheriff had just quitted, Buzz Emming was slumped in an armchair with his wounded arm, in a black silk sling, held awkwardly across his breast.

He was a stocky, simple-looking man. His face was unshaven, his hair ruffled, his eyes bleary. Luke had told him to lie low; that was all right with him—particularly as there was a bottle of whisky and a glass on the desk at his elbow. He reached out and grasped the bottle, tilted it, splashing the

liquid into the glass until it was full to the brim. He brought it shakily to his lips. Some of it spilled on the sling across his breast. He tilted it, guzzling with smacking sounds of his lips.

"All right, pardner," said a voice. "That's enough. You can put it down now."

BUZZ TURNED his head, the glass half-tilted in his hand, spilling more liquor on the already sodden sling. In the open doorway beside him stood a young cowboy with a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Although Buzz had never seen Mick Fenner before, he did not need telling that here was the young hellion in person.

"Put the glass down; you're getting wet."

Slowly, his eyes still looking at Mick, Buzz put the half-empty glass on the desk.

Mick took a few steps forward. The other man visibly shrank as the wicked-looking muzzle of the shotgun loomed nearer.

"What d'you know about the murder of Doc Matthews?"

"Nothing," yammered Buzz. "Nothing." His was the bravado of the stab-in-the-back and the shot-in-the-dark: at the sight of immediate peril, he was a craven sot—whiskey oozing from every pore as he sweated.

The shotgun barrel jerked nearer. "C'mon—talk!"

"Honest, I tell yuh, I know nothin'."

The barrel flashed upwards. Buzz screamed as it razed his cheek, leaving a thick, bloody line. It flashed again and he was dazed by a blow on the side of his head. As he fell sideways, his ruthless tormenter tore the sling from his wounded arm. He heard the voice say: "Let's have a look at this arm yuh got caught in a door."

Mick leaned the shotgun against the desk. Buzz squealed again as his bandages were torn roughly away, revealing the tender flesh wound.

"Just as I thought," said Mick. "A bullet hole. That's where I hit you the other night."

"No," groaned Buzz. "I done it cleaning my gun. It went off..."

Mick retrieved the shotgun. "Get up," he snarled.

Buzz rose unsteadily to his

feet. Mick prodded him. "Get moving!"

Buzz shuffled forward. "What are yuh gonna do?" he cried.

His simple drink-sodden mind saw a loop-hole. "Luke Polloi makes me do things for him. He threatened to get me strung up."

* * *

ON THE balcony, Polloi had finished his little speech, couched in careful terms: self-righteous, indignant, inflammatory. Once before he had sent the mob out to do his dirty work. He meant them to do it again.

He and the sheriff were descending the stairs when from above them a voice cried: "No need to go out lookin' for Doc Matthews' murderer. He's here!"

Heads swivelled upwards again. The mob gaped at two more figures on the balcony. The tottering Buzz Emmings, bandages hanging from his limp bleeding arm; and, beside him, a shotgun levelled, the grim-faced Mick Fenner.

The nerve of this young hellion! He must be raving mad! They were silent. Polloi and the sheriff stopped dead on the stairs, looking cautiously upwards.

Mick raised his voice again. "If I see any suspicious movements down there I'll start blasting." The crowd was still, nobody seemed inclined to take a chance.

Mick said: "Emming here has confessed to me that he shot Doc Matthews at the order of Luke Polloi... Hold it, Polloi, or I'll blow your head off."

"It's a lie," snarled the saloon-owner. "Emming is drink-crazy; he don't know what he's saying. You've forced him to say things."

Some of the words impinged on Buzz's dull brain. He said: "You did. You..."

A gun barked at the back of the room; the mob scattered as the shotgun retaliated. One of the huge chandeliers—Polloi's pride and joy—crashed on their heads. Buzz Emming, plugged through the heart, fell with it, bringing part of the balcony rail with him. The shotgun boomed again and the other chandelier fell.

"Get that younker!" yelled the voice of Luke Polloi.

FLAMES stabbed the blackness. The gunfire was deafening. Somebody screamed; men cursed and shouted as they blundered into each other like flies batting against a wall. A bartender lit a couple of hurricane-lanterns and grotesque shadows struggled on the yellow walls.

Mick went out the way he had come in: through the window at the end of the landing, down a drainpipe onto the roof of a lean-to. From there it was only a short drop to the ground.

He landed lightly, darting forward immediately.

Around the corner came two men. They both fired as Mick flung himself behind the shelter of the lean-to. The slugs *pinged* on its corrugated sheeting-walls.

Mick poked the barrel of the shotgun around the corner and pressed the trigger. The men flung themselves flat and the discharge screamed over their heads. Their fear of the havoc wrought by shotgun-shot kept them on their bellies, giving Mick a chance to speed away along the backs of the buildings, keeping close against them in the shadows.

Behind him he could hear them shouting: "Here he is! Round the back!"

The Golden Buck was almost empty now. Its customers were on the sidewalk, milling in the street. Nobody seemed to notice that Luke Polloi and Sheriff Pattison had stayed behind; had, indeed, gone back to the former's office.

THE BIGGEST part of the mob, led by Polloi's men, set off in full cry after the fugitive; the rest lingered. They were mostly older townsfolk; many of them had taken a hand in a previous lynching and had felt rather ashamed of themselves afterwards. Further food for speculation had been fed to them in the drunken words of Buzz Emming before he was shot. Many said that it was one of Polloi's men —one of the luckless Buzz's erstwhile pardners—who had fired the shot. Maybe he had been aiming at Mick Fenner. But the fact that he had got Buzz plumb center was certainly a powerful coincidence.

These things certainly bore thinking about—if they let their baser instincts get the better of them they were liable to do something awful, something they'd be mighty sorry for afterwards.

They milled like steers in a crowded pen, uncertain, a little scared, lacking a leader. Some of them saw Judge Prescott and his men enter and turned eagerly towards them.

The grizzled judge had gathered about him townsfolk who were noted for their civic pride and sense of fair-play. Old Ike Mathers, the livery man, who had been scalped by Indians and lived to tell the tale, his skull like a bloody map of the territory over which he had once raised hell. Grizzled Jim Keplow, mailman, who had been a Pony Express rider and was supposed to be about ninety, though he didn't look a day over sixty. Bert Kent, the blacksmith, an intelligent ape who had been a cavalry sergeant and enjoyed fighting more than anything else in the world. And that wasn't all! The judge had certainly gathered to himself a real passel of hell-raisers, young and old!

He was kind of an old hellion himself, at that—and, when he failed to get attention right off, the judge fired a couple of shots into the roof, bringing down a shower of plaster.

Then, without any more preliminaries he boomed: "If us townsfolk stick together we're more than a match for Pollei, and his weak tool, Sheriff Pettison and all their mob. Don't let yourself be misled by self-righteous platitudes and smooth talking. You all know me; I talk to you straight."

He paused, then raising his hands above his head. "If you want to do something about the evil that is ruining our town, follow me!"

He began to walk. Although he did not show it, his senses were in a turmoil. All the time he was spouting, young Mick was being hounded by that mob. Mick was smart; the judge prayed he was smart enough to evade them until help was at hand. When the others began slowly to follow him he breathed a huge sigh of relief. Once more he had put it over. The first step was accomplished. Now he had to think and act fast.

V

CAMPHOR HILL was in an uproar. The mob had split up into separate factions, each getting in the other's way. One bunch had retraced their steps and were streaming down the middle of the street with a vague, but noisy, idea of heading him off. In the indiscipline and confusion, the fugitive could have mounted a horse and gotten well away from the town without much fear of capture. But Mick Fenner did not wish to do so.

He had crawled under the pilings at the back of an old log cabin, relic of the town's earlier days, and was lying deggo. The main pack ran past him in full cry. He waited a moment then came out of his hidey-hole and retraced his steps. He figured that Polloi and the sheriff would still be skulking in the Golden Buck and back there he meant to go. That was the last place the mob would look for him anyway.

He ran suddenly into three men.

"It's him!" yelled one of them.

Mick brought the shotgun up and around in a wide arc. The others were taken by surprise with their guns half out of their holsters. Two of them went over like skittles. The third got his gun out and fired, but he was off-balance: the slug went wide. Mick lunged forward with the gun. The man grunted and doubled up as the barrel caught him in his middle. Mick smacked him on top of the head as he was falling. He felt like beating his brains out for firing that shot: now the pack would be at his heels again.

HE HEARD them shouting. They had turned back, were coming nearer. Mick ran. Behind him one of the three men rose to his knees, thumbing the hammer of his gun. Mick bent low, zigzagging as the slugs came perilously close. He turned into an alley, charged along it with the shotgun held ready before him.

He was almost at the end when it was blocked by a knot of men. Again the wolf-like cries rose on the night-air. Mick threw himself flat, the shotgun outthrust. He squeezed the trigger as lead sang above

him. He swung the shotgun around in a wide arc as he fired. The men scattered, leaving one of their number motionless on the ground. Mick rose and charged them...

Again his surprise ruse worked: he was through, into the street, before they became aware of it; he was spinning on his heels, giving them another deadly burst from the shotgun. They scattered like rabbits and ran for cover. They let him off with only a few shots after his retreating back. They were scared of the shotgun, didn't know that it was now empty.

Keeping close in the shadows, Mick dropped his pace to a trot as he broke the seal on the other box of shot and began to reload the gun. Tucked in his belt he still had the loaded Colt he had taken from the deputy; but the shotgun was much more effective! For the first time that night he grinned.

DOWN THIS end of town things were quieter, but he kept a lookout for stragglers. Nevertheless he did not see the two men until they sprang from the shadows. One of them fired immediately. Mick fell sideways, pain searing his knee. The second man's belated shot passed over his head. Then Mick's finger contracted on the trigger and the shotgun boomed deafeningly.

The first man took the full blast in his stomach. He screamed horribly. His body bent in an arc as he went over backwards. Panic overwhelmed his companion. Instead of firing again he turned and ran. Mick did not waste shots on him but limped on. His knee felt as if it had been dipped in scalding water, some of which had run down his leg. He knew the sticky hot trickles were blood.

Before him in the street he saw another bunch of men advancing. Somehow they had got around in front of him! He raised the shotgun.

A voice called: "Mick! Hold it! It's the Judge!"

He lowered the gun and stumbled towards them. Two of the men ran forward to help and with his arms looped round their shoulders they half-ran, half-dragged him along while the Judge carried the shotgun.

As they carried him into the haven of the Judge's house the

cries of the lynch-mob sounded nearer.

THE HOUSE, not a large one, was packed with people. They made way for the new arrivals, asking questions, greeting Mick and the judge and the rest. Old friends of Mick's father's, most of them with their wives; friends of George; his own friends who he remembered as ragged-trousered kids. They patted him on the shoulders, complimented him on his escape, asked genuinely concerned questions about his wound. They knew he had not murdered his old friend, Doc Matthews. They helped him along to a couch at the back of the room. Mick fell on it, and relaxing with a grimace and a sigh began to roll up his trouser-leg. It was good to be among friends again.

He became aware that two people were standing before him and he raised his eyes. They rested on the shapely form of Jean Mackton then travelled upwards to her firm pretty face. She smiled.

"Let me do that for you?"

Mick nodded weakly with his mouth open. As she dropped to her knees his eyes were still on her face, on the full red lips, the firm chin, the straight, slightly tip-tilted nose, the wide hazel eyes, the brown hair, with reddish glints under the lamp-light, cascading over her shoulders. She was just as Perce had found her when he had gone back to the store. She had come like that, ready to do her utmost to help her harassed father, her childhood sweetheart, Mick, and the rest of the fighters.

Only when Perce Mackton spoke up did Mick become aware that the moon-faced little storekeeper stood beside his daughter.

"It's no good rollin' up the trouser-leg. Better to cut it." He produced a claspknife, opened it and got down beside Jean. Between them they slit the trouser-leg and gently pulled it away from the wound. Then Jean took command. "Get me some boiling water, Dad. And a clean cloth."

Perce bustled off to do her bidding. She looked up at her patient and said: "Lean back. Relax." Mick grinned at her and did as he was told but he

immediately clenched his teeth and his sudden pallor betokened the pain the movement cost him.

Judge Prescott came forward with a silver flask in his hand. He uncorked it and handed it to Mick. "Take a deep swig o' that, son."

MICK TOOK a deep one and spluttered. It was raw whiskey. It filled his veins and stomach with fire, and for a moment killed his pain. He took some more, slowly this time.

"Fine stuff that, Judge," he said as he returned the flask.

"I make it myself," the old man quipped. He winked. "Now I've done my bit I'll leave you to the gentle care of this little lady."

Perce returned with a bowl of steaming water and clean towels.

Jean smiled at Mick. "Now relax," she said.

Gently she began to bathe the wound.

Leaning back Mick could just see the top of her head, the straight white parting in the thick silky hair. He felt like bending forward and stroking it.

She startled him by looking up once more; he felt himself flush under her gaze. She said: "Am I hurting you?"

He grinned. "No, carry on."

She was amazingly gentle, what little pain she caused him was sweet: he felt he could sit there forever, wounded leg or no wounded leg, and bask in the warmth and ease of her presence.

He remembered when they were kids together, dazed with puppy-love, vowing never to part. Right now he felt like making those vows all over again . . .

JUDGE PRESCOTT had just returned from the front window.

"The pack are still howling for their prey," he said. "They sound kind of puzzled. There's a knot of 'em gathered just outside. Maybe they're suspicious . . ."

A babel of conflicting talk arose. Some of the company wanted to attack the mob; others, more cautious, advocated getting Mick out of the way until it could be proved con-

clusively that he was not the murderer of Doc Matthews.

While they were arguing amongst themselves, the Judge and Perce Mackton were talking rapidly in undertones.

Finally the Judge raised his voice again, addressing the company. "I don't think you folks realize what we're up against... You know, without any argument, that Mick Fenner did not kill Doc Matthews. But that isn't the only question tonight. You must realize by now that the Doc's murder and George Fenner's murder—I repeat, *murder!*—were both engineered by Luke Polloi. And our precious sheriff won't stir a finger—in fact, he makes up to Polloi whenever possible... Now Perce here has a few things to say to you which'll make the whole issue a lot clearer."

Perce mounted a table to speak. And for a short time this little retiring storekeeper held his listeners in thrall, fed their indignation until they were raring to go—even the doubters changed their minds and significantly eased guns in holsters.

He told them of how his friend, George Fenner, had bought a piece of land, the lushest grassland in the territory, with the purest water-hole. His plan was to start building a ranch there for him, and his brother, Mick, when he returned.

THEN LUKE POLLOI came to town, bought the Golden Buck and built his ranch on the land abutting George's piece. Polloi wanted George's land, too; he wanted to be all-powerful on the Camphor Hill range, and he meant to stop at nothing to gain his ends.

He offered George a price for the land and George refused it. Polloi threatened him and George laughed in his face.

George had one weakness: he liked to 'buck the tiger' now and then. And this was where Polloi hoped he might slip up... Perce was surmising now. He figured that Polloi fixed it so that the dealer, Jig Randall, would pick a fight with George and shoot him. But Jig wasn't fast enough: George got him first. Then Polloi, in desperation, turned his mob on George.

"We all know what happened," said Perce.

The company shuffled their feet, coughed, looked grim, avoided each other's eyes. Too well they knew what happened...

Polloi probably did not realize that George's two friends —Perce Mackton and Doc Matthews—knew of all his dealings with George. They saw Sheriff Pattison, asked him to do something, to seek out the leader of the lynch-mob who had murdered George because he shot one of their number in self-defence.

But the sheriff was non-commital, he made vague promises. Days passed and he did nothing. They began to realize he did not mean to do anything. Then the final blow fell. One night an armed gang called at the homes of both Perce Mackton and Doc Matthews, and threatened that if they did not quit shooting off their mouths, something was liable to happen to their families. Something terrible might happen to the widowed Perce's only daughter, Jean, and to the Doc's wife and young son.

"What could we do?" asked Perce, his face anguished. "What would you have done in our places?... Then Mick came back. I ought to have warned him right away. I blame myself... I figure Doc went to tell him everything and was bushwacked on the way. Clem, the deputy bein' conveniently near to pin the crime on Mick."

Perce stopped talking and climbed slowly from the table. They clustered round him. Nobody blamed him for anything, least of all Mick. Jean's eyes filled with tears as she took her father's arm.

VI

"WELL, WHAT do you folks say now?" boomed the Judge.

Angry cries rose from the crowd.

"I'm for going out right now and facing that mob," said the judge. "Who's with me?"

There was a roar of assent.

"Six of the oldest of you stay with the women," said the Judge; "the rest follow me."

A new voice rose above the din. The voice of Mick Fenner. "Remember one thing: Luke Polloi is mine!"

"Oh, Mick, you're hardly fit," said Jean softly.

"I'm all right," said Mick. "I can walk... You wouldn't want me to let George down would you, Jean?"

"No—I guess not," her voice trembled. "Look after yourself." Her hand shot out suddenly and gripped his. She dropped it and turned away.

"I'll be careful, *chiquita*," said Mick, softly. He followed the rest of the men.

The pack outside the house was growing. They sensed their prey.

The Judge's front door opened and the men began to file out, taking up their stand along the walls of the house. There were a good many of them; quite as many as in the shifting mob, and they looked much more purposeful. Their hands were on the butts of their guns. Many of them had rifles and shotguns held forward ready for use. The mob shifted and murmured; they were at loss. Then the Judge and Perce came out with Mick Fenner. The murmuring became louder.

Mick limped forward and faced them boldly, the Judge beside him. The Judge held up his hands. "Listen to me!"

THAT STENTORIAN voice commanded silence and attention.

"I've very little to say. Here is the man you seek. We know that he is innocent of the murder of Doc Matthews. The murderer, Buzz Fleming, has already paid the price. A lot of quickly as possible. Their wrath was righteous and they you know that, too, but you are hounding Mick Fenner because you have been ordered to do so. We know who has ordered this and why? The same man who ordered the death of George Fenner and Doc Matthews. We, the townsfolk of Camphor Hill, are coming after that man and all his minions. We give you fair warning. Those of you who are townsfolk, who think maybe they ought to change their minds and come on this side are at liberty to do so now..."

They murmured and shifted. The grim-faced men against the wall, braced themselves and held tight to their guns. Death poised in the air. The mob shifted some more. Its ranks broke

and, slowly, in twos and threes, about twenty men changed sides.

The Judge's voice boomed again. "We give the rest of you five minutes to clear. Then we're coming a-gunnin'. We mean to wipe you out or drive you out."

The mob was outnumbered now. They scattered and began to move away.

"They're making for the Golden Buck," said Mick.

"Rats returning to their holes," said the Judge. "Well, if they stick there we shall have to smoke 'em out."

Mick strapped on a gunbelt a man handed him. The little pouches were full of cartridges. He spun the cylinder of the gun he had taken from Clem, the deputy. It was full. He slid it in the holster; he made a few practice draws.

Watching him, Judge Prescott could not but admire his speed. He reflected that wherever Mick had been on his travels, whatever he had done, had benefited him. From a gangling, rather scatterbrained kid had come a purposeful and dangerous young man.

THE CROWD had moved away from the wall, were shifting impatiently: inherently peaceable men with a duty to do, wanting to get it over as quickly as possible. Their wrath was righteous and they did not want it to cool.

The Judge took a massive silver watch from his pocket. With the other hand he accepted a rifle from a man beside him. He raised this above his head. But it was Mick Fenner who, with a little shrug of his shoulders, a half-turn of his head, shouted: "Let's go!"

They spread out, filling the street and each sidewalk, walking steadily, purposefully—and silently. In front of them, the street was deserted; but as they got nearer the Golden Buck a party of men came out, feverishly untied their horses from the hitching-rack. As they mounted, the Judge's stentorian bellow filled the night-air.

"You'd better ride hard and far, boys, or we'll be coming after you."

"Some of Polloi's ranchhands," said a man behind him. "They'll probably call for their tackle, then light out."

The attackers were still nearer when three more men came through the batwings. They saw the ominous mob and hesitated; then one of them made the fateful mistake of going for his gun.

Three shots rang out from the front rank of the attackers. Two of the men fell on the spot. The third one stumbled forward and came up against the hitching-post. From there he slowly slid down, off the sidewalk and flat on his face in the dust of the roadway.

Shots came from the Golden Buck. Behind Judge Prescott a man gave a little gasp and collapsed.

"Spread out, men!" boomed the Judge. "Take cover!"

THEY BROKE up into groups, taking cover on both sides of the street as the firing from the saloon became intense. Then the wheel-rutted street was clear except for one feebly-moving figure in its center. It was Bert Kent, the huge blacksmith—the man who loved fighting.

While two men ran out again and grasped him, the others kept up withering fire at the windows of the saloon behind which the defenders lurked. Answering shots were few as the besieged men kept out of sight. The two Samaritans returned safely with their burden and laid him gently down behind a cart which had been speedily upturned...

But, as they bent over him, he died. The word passed round: "Bert Kent 's dead," as grim-faced men hugged shadows, crawled, darted, getting steadily nearer to their goal—and pouring withering fire at it as they did so.

Up on the roof of the Golden Buck, where sharpshooters had taken cover behind the arch of the false front, a man screamed shrilly as he fell over the parapet and hurtled to the dust below. Another man went over backwards up there and disappeared from sight. The attackers had their sharpshooters, too.

Mick Fenner, with the Judge, Perce Mackton, old Ike Mathers, livery-man, Jim Keplow, mailman; and two young cowhands named George Plestow and Ken Chatterton, were crouching in the shadows on the same side of the street as the

saloon. They were sidling along getting nearer, with every step, to the batwings. Behind them other groups were following.

On this side of the street they were safe from the snipers at the windows but had to watch those up on the roof and on the balcony.

THE OLD Judge, never a gunman, but a first-class hunter with a rifle since he was a boy, had numerous chances to prove his prowess; and he did not let them pass. One bold waddy seeking to fire on the heads of the attackers came close to the balcony rail but before he could level his gun, the Judge got him plumb center.

He came over the balcony head first, bringing part of the top rail with him. His companion, who had followed him, backed just in time to escape a like fate. He did not appear again.

Mick, now leading about twenty men, had reached the mouth of the alleyway that ran alongside the Golden Buck and led to the back-places.

He sped up here followed by Perce, the two young cowhands, and four or five more men. The rest followed the judge as he attacked the front, his stentorian bellow calling everybody on.

A man came out of the side door of the saloon and saw Mick, a limping phantom, swooping down on him. His startled hesitation lost him any chance he might have had. Mick fired without pausing in his hopping stride. The heavy slug caught the man squarely in the face and his cry was strangled as he went over backwards.

MICK PAUSED at the door, then went through, his gun flaming. Two more men, trying to make their exit, walked right into the hail of lead. Then Mick, followed by the others, was through into the saloon as Judge Prescott and the rest burst in the front way. But resistance was at an end: crestfallen men allowed themselves to be relieved of their guns.

Mick reloaded his Colt as he limped swiftly upstairs. He ran along the landing, flattened himself against the wall as he turned the knob of the office-door and propelled it open with a lash from the foot of his sound leg. He followed up, gun

ready, and almost fell headlong over the bulky body of Sheriff Dill Pattison.

His shirtfront was a mass of blood. He opened his eyes as Mick bent over him.

He answered Mick's unspoken question, saying weakly: "Polloi lit out—back—he blamed me for all—this. I tried to stop him. He..." His eyes closed.

Mick left him, went downstairs again, through the saloon. From the hitching-rack he got a horse, mounted, and rode out of town.

* * *

TEN MINUTES hard slogging brought him to the Double P, Luke Polloi's ranch. It lay ghost-like, silent in the moonlight. As Mick dismounted and crossed warily to the ranchhouse, it seemed that no living thing could be there...

Then he thought he heard a sound from the outbuildings to the right of him. Bent low, he limped across the intervening space and flattened himself against the log walls. He peered around a corner. He could not see anything but he felt certain there was somebody skulking there.

The nearest door was up ahead, to reach it he had to pass a window. He went past it almost on his knees. He reached the door and, flattened against the wall beside it, stood panting. His forehead was beaded with sweat: his wounded knee throbbed horribly.

He reached out and lifted the latch of the door and, at the same instant, lashed out with his foot, crashing it open. Nothing happened. He whipped around the corner, almost on his hands and knees as he dived through the doorway. He almost cried out with the pain of his knee but his gun was held steadily in front of him.

There was blackness all around him. He swerved away from the door and stood with eyes and ears straining. He heard quick sobbing breathing.

"Who's there?" he said softly. "Speak up or I'll let you have it."

"Yeth thir," the voice was an almost childish lisp.

"Who are you?"

"Ming Lee, the cook, thir."

MICK FELT like laughing. "Where's Polloi?"

"I think he'th in the lanchhouth, thir."

"Anybody else?"

"No, thir, they all left."

"All right—you lay low an' you won't get hurt."

As Mick left the place he saw the figure and threw himself sideways. The slug whistled past him. Then Polloi turned and ran round the corner of the buildings.

Mick followed cautiously. He could not see his quarry. He retraced his steps. A slug took his hat off. He yelled and fell flat round the corner. He lay doggo.

It seemed ages he waited. Then Polloi came along the verandah of the ranchhouse. The moonlight glinted on the barrel of his gun.

Mick rose and stepped out of cover, limped into the moonlight, called his enemy's name softly. Polloi's gun tilted and Mick fired from the hip. Polloi's shot, as his finger contracted on the trigger, ploughed into the boards at his feet.

Polloi swayed then fell backwards. He came to rest half on, half off the verandah, head hanging down ignominously in the dust.

The moonlight shone on his upturned face, the eyes staring, the lips bared, showing the teeth in a last evil grimace. The moonlight was pitiless and the dead face was not good to look upon.

Mick slowly turned away and limped back to his horse. As he rode back to Camphor Hill he could hear hoofbeats—coming nearer as his friends rode to meet him. And there would be the ride home and a girl waiting and, with her to share, peace in the land of his boyhood.

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MILES CITY'S FIRST SHERIFF

True Fact Feature

by Marc Peterson

MILES CITY, in eastern Montana, was a typical wide-open frontier town in the 1860's. Fort Keogh was there first, and when Colonel Miles got tired of the gamblers and chippies around his fort, he kicked them out. The civilians moved a few miles away and set up tents. The tent settlement grew and soon became a town with a muddy main road and rows of board and log shacks on each side of it. The places of business were saloons, dance halls, gambling joints, sporting houses, and a trader's store—and they all did a roaring business.

In the beginning the tough element—the swaddies, buffalo-hunters, tin horns, bull-whackers, and mule-skinners—ran the town about as they pleased. There was at least one brawl every night, sometimes more. Homeless men, loose women, and alcohol have always produced an explosive mixture when mixed in the proper proportions, and it wasn't hard to get the right mixture in Miles City.

The easiest way to handle this kind of trouble was to let it settle itself—and this is exactly what the law-abiding people did. However as the town grew and the brawling increased, the law-abiding people decided to employ a sheriff and put a stop to some of the worse kinds of brawling—murder, slugging and robbery. So they hired their first sheriff—

Henry Wormwood, better known as Hank.

Although Miles City was never noted for the tough gunplay of such Kansas cowtowns as Abilene and Dodge City, it still had its moments when the marshal had to be a man of decision and courage. For some unknown reason, Hank wore his sandy hair long, which made the townsfolk wonder about the usefulness of their new sheriff in a showdown. But Hank wasn't worried about what the people thought and said; and he wasn't worried about his own capabilities as sheriff, either. Although none of the townspeople were particularly interested in putting Hank to the test, there were some men that were.

ONE NIGHT the report came in to Hank that there was a big bunch of swaddies at Strader's saloon. This was nothing new: there were always soldiers coming into Miles City from nearby Fort Keogh. But this time it was different. One of them was getting drunk and belligerent, and telling his friends what he thought of the town marshal.

"Yeah, no red-headed, long-haired SOB is gonna do anything to me. I'd sure like to see him try something," he said patting the holster of his service pistol.

"You tell 'im, Ben," the soldier's friends encouraged, spoiling for some excitement.

Hank realized that his hand was being called. The townspeople had been doubting him long enough; and if he let this opportunity go by, they'd doubt him even more.

"I've got to get that guy," Hank said to some friends.

"You better not, Hank. He's got a lot of pals with him. If he don't get you, they sure will."

But Hank was sore now; he was determined to shut the town up once and for all. He got up, checked his belt and holster, and walked out into the starry night. Silently, his friends followed as he strode down to Strader's saloon. He could hear the laughter and the chinking of glasses as he approached the swinging doors.

As soon as he stepped inside the place went quiet quick. Glancing about, Hank saw as many as 25 soldiers, the tough

drunk slouching at the far end of the bar. Hank's six-shooter was stuck loosely in its holster under his left arm, and he could draw it fast when he had to. But as he walked slowly up to the bar, he was careful to keep his hands down and open, and a long ways from the gun. Keeping his eyes on the man at the bar, and seemingly oblivious of anyone else in the room, Hank walked right up to him.

"What's this I hear?" he began, not unfriendly. "You wouldn't do anything to hurt me, would you?"

THE SOLDIER sure could have hurt him if it had been just a matter of beef and muscle. He wasn't as tall as Hank, but far more stocky and powerful. But while Hank was only moderately strong, he had a pair of long hands with long, slender, strong fingers; and he also had the tremendous advantage of knowing what he was going to do, whereas the soldier could only guess. Suddenly Hank's hands shot out encircling the man's neck. At the same instant he lifted the soldier off the floor, pinning him against the wall. He began to gag and choke; his tongue popped out and his face went purple. Holding him for a moment with one hand, Hank reached down with the other and took away his gun, then set him down. With one eye and his six-shooter covering his prisoner, Hank coolly surveyed the rest of the soldiers.

"I'm gonna take this boy back to the fort," he said. "I advise you fellows not to interfere."

With this bold statement he walked out with his man, and not a soldier made a move to stop him. Hank's friends looked at each other knowingly.

"I'm sure glad we saw this," one said. "There's gonna be some mighty surprised people around here tomorrow."

By the middle of the next morning the whole town knew about Hank's exploit. Although there were no apologies (and Hank didn't expect any), he knew he had accomplished his purpose. There was a different tone in peoples' words, and a different look in their eyes. Hell, Hank thought to himself, I could braid my hair now and they wouldn't say a damn thing.

rustler's gulch

by CLARE HAMILTON

The "skinny kid" who turned up suddenly on the trail-drive turned out to be Rosie Lane — playing hookey from her father's ranch. And Steve Bransell was ready to chew nails, because they were headed for rustler's gulch, where hot lead would soon be flying!

IT WAS when the cattle were streaming out of the echoing canyon onto the grass of Rustler's Gulch that Steve Bransell first became aware of the extra hand riding with the outfit.

The steers were bellowing with relief to be in the open air again. They slowed as they spread, three hundred of the best cows off the Star V. But Steve, foreman of the men driving the beasts to the railhead, hardly saw them at the moment. He rode back to the dust where Andy and Rio were noisily urging the drag cows along.

"Who's the skinny kid lighin' down there near Chick and Bud?" Steve snapped, his lean, tanned face hard with suspicion.

"Shucks, he joined up jest afore the canyon," said Rio, red-faced from the late afternoon's sizzling heat. "We figgered you'd took him on for the trail."

The thin stranger in the faded blue jeans was standing rather doubtfully beside a rawboned sorrel. Steve swung from his black and strode across. The kid seemed to panic and, turn-

ing, dashed over in front of some grazing cattle. A horseman wouldn't have alarmed the two closest bulls but the rushing human figure did; the huge animals snorted and plunged forward.

The stranger rushed clear but it took Chick and Bud's combined efforts to swing the bulls back to the herd while Steve took off after the lithe youngster who was rushing for the cover of the creek timber. Grabbing the red checkered shirt, Steve swung the small figure around.

"Who the heck..." he began, then grinned, his steady, brown eyes taking in the familiar grey eyes, narrow eyebrows—and the swelling lines of the shirt front! He slapped back the sombrero and whipped off the red bandana. Black curls flopped down the "lad's" shoulders.

"Rosie Lane, eh?" Steve chuckled. "You crazy gal! Howcome you so durned loco as to follow the beef?"

"DAD WAS so stubborn!" Rosie said, defiantly. "Refused to let me take the stage to the railhead stores and I want a blouse from there. I was scared to ride away alone, but I know all you boys, and I knew you and Dad wouldn't agree to me coming; so I borrowed a bronc none of you knew from Julia Evans, and joined up at the fork."

"And left your dad worried stiff?"

"Nonsense. I left a note." Rosie shrugged as Steve pushed her rather roughly back to the amazed outfit, who stared, then burst into laughter.

Thrusting Rosie down onto a log, Steve snapped: "I can't send you home alone. It's a two-day ride, and I can't spare a man to escort you. The boss hasn't chased you, I reckon, because he thinks a rough trek might cure you. Yeah, you'd better stay."

Rosie breathed easier. At 18, she considered that her cheeky prettiness was enough to make any male glad of her presence.

Steve ruined that theory immediately by drawling: "You're only a nuisance, Rosie. You don't even understand cattle like a rancher's daughter should. Look how you near caused a stampede! Your place is in the kitchen..."

"Never!" Rosie snapped.

"D'you know what this purty dip of grassland is called?" Steve finished. "Rustler's Gulch! And we couldn't time the drive no other way than to be forced to bed down here for one night. Waal, this is it, so serves you right if you run slap-bang into a six-gun ruckus."

Rosie flounced over to her sorrel, took some beans and a fry-pan from the saddlebag and inexpertly began making a fire. Andy went across just in time to prevent her starting a bush-fire but, apart from that, Rosie got her own evening meal without help, then slept soundly in her blanket behind the cottonwood!

THE FIVE STAR V men didn't leave the cattle unguarded through the long, coyote-pierced night. Two punchers were always in the saddle. And Steve, unknown to his four men, stayed awake *all* the time because, whereas the men watched the cattle, Steve watched the men! They were a good bunch but, with a girl in the camp—well, Steve wasn't taking chances!

Towards dawn, the rustlers struck. It was Rio and Chick's turn to move their horses gently around the sleeping herd. Bud and Andy were snoring. Steve was drowsily keeping his self-imposed vigil. And Rosie was asleep—on the side of the gulch closest to the narrow trail down which the raiders rode on muff-hooved horses.

Suddenly Steve nudged Andy and Bud awake. Springing to his feet, he hissed: "Over there! The rustlers!"

A Colt roared. Rio and Chick, circling the cows, had spotted the blotch of horses sweeping into the dark gulch. Knowing Rosie was almost in their path, they fired at once to disorganize the raiders. But instead of turning tail, the five rustlers pelted on—only they now rode in a wide circle right around the cattle and the Star V outfit.

Guns blazed in jagged orange splashes of booming light. Cattle leaped up and moved closer together. Rosie screamed and rushed between hot-breathing steers until she found Steve. She flung herself to the ground beside him. Like the other four cowpokes, he was lying behind his pulled-to-earth horse. He

was angry to find her so close to him and ordered her to crawl to the creek. She refused and screamed again as a bullet clipped the ground inches away. Steve's sixer belched an answer at the fast-riding rustlers still circling the herd in a crazy, lead-dodging, lead-slinging rodeo ride.

HIS AIM was lucky. One rustler stopped the slug with his head. The body tumbled off the horse—which swerved and plunged in among the cattle. A bull lunged and the stampede was on. There was wild confusion as shouting men dragged up trembling horses, leaped aboard and pelted for the safety of the creek timber.

Steve had hurled Rosie onto his horse. He streaked through the darkness, feeling the wind of slashing, swinging horns just missing his legs. And, down by the creek, the five Star V men and the girl found the rustlers calmly waiting for them! Naturally, being in the outer circle, the raiders had reached the thickets first. It was the only safe place to go, the crashing cattle filling the rest of the gulch in their wild escape.

"Reach fer heaven," sneered a cold voice as Steve reined in among his equally surprised men, who had stopped to await Steve's orders. "We kinda expected you once yore cows lit out. That stampede sure weakened yore grip on the war, huh?" A gun barked as eyes in the thickets evidently saw Rio sneak his sixer up. Rio grunted and blood soaked his left sleeve.

"Okay, skunks, you win for the minute," Steve called. "My men and I, and this lady here, will play safe while you've got the drop on us."

"A lady, did yer say?" The unmasked rustler-boss rode out of the high buffalo-berry bushes. "You sure tote all you need for a trip, buddy! Don't worry," he growled, reading Steve's mind. "We only want the beef.... Pietro and Red, round up them ornery steers. It's near dawn so you oughta be able to haze 'em back easy enough."

SO, WHILE two of the outlaws rode off to collect as many of the cattle as they could, Darg Mawson and a thick-voiced half-breed called

Calman disarmed the Star V men and made them and Rosie dismount. They roped them securely and, as a sickly gray dawn sneaked over Rustler's Gulch, and jack-rabbits bounded through the grasses, Mawson outlined his brazen plan.

"We're sick of overbrandin'. It wastes time when we have to wait for the brands to heal afore riskin' the open trail to our agent. So we're takin' you clucks right along with yore own beef. I'll be done up in a dandy wig and you'll say I'm a friend, if anyone wonders as to why I'm there while you sell the herd to yore own railhead agent. You'll get cash—or a bullet—and, later, you'll hand that cash to me. Then we'll, ah, escort you outa town to a pesky cliff I know. You guys and the female will go over that, then me and my boys will hit the trail proper. Now, ain't that clever?"

Mawson's thick head settled down in his huge shoulders with pride. The Star V bunch didn't answer. In fact, they were very subdued, lying there at the feet of two rustlers in the notorious gulch, while dawn's grayness changed to a quivering gold which drew the perfumes from the many flowering bushes down by the bird-noisy creek.

IT WAS seven o'clock before a sweating Pietro and Red drove Star V cows down into the gulch again. A rough tally showed half of the original three hundred had been rounded up.

"That's f i n e!" Mawson gloated, watching his three men ease the cattle along to an open part of the creek. "I'll git grub now—but only for four! You Star V lugs don't git nothin' yet."

"Well, thank goodness for that," Rosie burst out. "I was scared you'd have made *me* do the cooking. Thank you, Mr. Rustler!"

Mawson's heavy brows knit. Had he missed a trick? Slowly, he muttered: "Reckon you're right! Why should I play cook when there's a female along? Go right ahead, ma'am..."

"No, oh no!" shouted Rosie. "I don't want to. I won't!"

Her vehement refusal made Mawson all the more determined. He untied her, kept a gun trained on her and pushed her over to the little fire. Steve

and Rio, Bud, Andy and even the rather placid Bud watched in angry silence while Rosie fried eggs from the rustlers' packs. Yet, somehow, Steve fancied Rosie was putting on an act as she sobbed!

"*And* beans," rasped Mawson. "We gotta have hot chili-beans, too!"

The other three outlaws, back from the creek where the cattle would squelch contentedly for some time yet, chuckled and nodded.

"I don't just heat beans," Rosie said, scornfully. "I cook them in special thick ketchup, and I'm not getting *that* ketchup from *my* bag just to feed nasty, wicked rustlers..."

"Oh, no?" Mawson guffawed, his curiosity and greed aroused. "Go get it pronto. Pietro will go with you, to make sure you don't grab a rod instead."

ROSIE OBEYED meekly and came back with a large bottle of sauce which she tipped and stirred into the pan of beans. At last she put two eggs, sauced beans and chopped chili onto each of the outlaws' plates, then cooked their coffee while they ate triumphantly.

"Too much chili! Too strong! Can't taste the beans!" grunted Calman, suddenly. Pietro and Red also swore and began spitting.

"Not only that!" Mawson abruptly slammed his plate to the ground. "It tastes... What was in that "special" ketchup..."

He strode threateningly towards the cowering Rosie, but jerked to an abrupt halt and doubled up. He was instantly sick and writhing in pain. The three other rustlers had also turned green and seemed powerless to move.

Rosie snatched a knife from the helpless Mawson's boot and slashed free the five Star V men. It was a sharp anticlimax to the rustlers' raid. Four of the Star V punchers disarmed and tied up the sick Red, Calman and Pietro. Steve moved to do the same to Mawson. But Mawson, still squirming, squeezed enough strength from himself to drag a gun from its holster.

He fired pointblank. Steve jerked sidewards, kicked the gun hand and grabbed the gun as it flew. He twirled it into position. Mawson, kneeling now, had pulled his other gun.

Mawson fired first. Steve saved himself by falling forward. The lead whizzed over him as he butted Mawson in the pain-racked stomach.

Mawson fell sidewards, near the cook fire. He grabbed up the knife Rosie had used to scoop beans from cans. It was keen and hot.

"Look out, Steve," shouted Rio and rushed forward. The knife sliced down too wide and nicked Steve's wrist. Steve stumbled, fell. The knife glittered now towards his throat. Bucking up, Steve caught the wrist in his teeth and bit hard. Shouting, Mawson let the knife clang to the ground. Steve slammed a blow almost from ground level and Mawson was rocked backwards, unconscious, his head in the fire.

THEY DRAGGED him out with singed hair and tied him up with his three partners.

"Er...by the way," Steve said, voicing everybody's curiosity as he rolled a quirley. "Was it just your bad cooking that folded the no-goods up, Rosie, or..."

"No," said Rosie, pertly. "You told me earlier that I didn't know cattle, Steve. Maybe not, but I know men. I can't use a gun, and d'you think I'd have come here without any weapon? No! I had a bottle of ketchup—laced with liniment! used it on our rustlers once *they* fell for my trick of making me cook."

Steve said nothing. Rio, Andy, Bud and Chick congratulated her enough and the trussed-up outlaws' scowls was also satisfying.

And, somehow, Steve's black horse fell behind until it was level with Rosie's sorrel. Rosie looked sidewards at him and murmured, "*You* never complimented me on my cunning with the cooking..."

"I did that even before the ruckus started," Steve smiled. "Remember? Didn't I tell you your place was in the kitchen? And, er, mebbe I've already decided your *particular* kitchen may be in the ranch-house I'll soon own for myself...that is, if you say yes..."

Rosie giggled and went a pretty red. Steve began whistling, and it was suddenly a really beautiful day, while the dangers of Rustler's Gulch were left far behind.

Complete Novel

secret of the mesa

by D. L. Hyde

It wasn't only the fact that Sam Hunter was publishing a crusading newspaper in Red Boot that was making trouble. There was a deeper secret connected with the nearby mesa that threatened Sam's life, and promised something worse to his daughter...

"AND THAT," Sam Hunter explained to his daughter, Eve, is one reason why we're going west. The other, and by far the more important, is that we're needed there. It's a young, growing country, unconsciously groping after new ideals—ideals that the press, with its capacity for directing attention and for generalizing, can help create and define. We can no longer be of service here, except to grasping politicians, money-mad and power-mad petty authorities..."

Although there remain today only a few lost tin plates, gunmetal spurs, and cheap glass crystals buried in the sandy, red clay for future generations of archeologists to find, Red Boot was once the principal trading center for a frontier territory of hundreds of square miles. Where now the mesquite grows frugally in the brick-colored earth that gave the town its name was the single, and therefore main, street of the typical cattle-country town, with its false two-story fronts, board sidewalks, and shabby, wooden marquees.

There stood the Palace Cafe,

the town's only painted building, and, diagonally opposite, the Cattlemen's Bank, with a plank laid down from doorsill to street, in lieu of stairs. Up the street was Tom's Haircut Salon, and Woody's General Store; next to the bank, side by side and huddled together as if for mutual protection, were the little cubbyholes for the sheriff and the Cattlemen's Association. There old Jed Chalmers sat on the Palace Cafe steps early one hot morning in 187—, and spat, and whittled, and looked up in open-mouthed amazement at the cavalcade descending.

FIRST CAME a wagon part Conestoga, part surrey, and the remainder indefinable, loaded to the groaning point with goods; and following it was a train of pack-horses, head to tail, and stretching out to invisibility in the dust the wagon had raised. Jed spat out his wad and rose slowly to his feet, counting.

"Fourteen, I make it," he said. Then, as the equipage halted, "Hi, Sary!"

A bonneted head looked around from the wagon seat, and a girlish voice inquired, "Is there any one about?"

"Jes' a minute, ma'am," Jed called back. Twisting his neck so that his voice carried into the cafe, he bellowed again, "Sary! Cain't yuh hear no more?"

Annoyedly, a woman's voice shouted back, "I'm comin'! What's the commotion? Y'd better not be gittin' me up this early in the mornin' f' nothin', Jed Chalmers!"

"Looks like a consarn medicine show."

This probably warranted allegation produced results from the pack-train. From the offside of the wagon, a man descended, and walked across the street towards Jed. At the same moment, a woman appeared at the door of the cafe, and the man, who knew authority when he saw it, redirected his steps towards her.

"My name's Sam Hunter," he said, sweeping off his dove-gray felt hat and disclosing a shock of silvery white hair. "I was wondering whether my daughter and I might obtain assistance here in temporarily disposing of our belongings and

in finding a place to bathe, and rest from our journey."

SARY EXAMINED his stock of flowered silk the fine cut of his now dust-soiled blue coat, and his firm features. She liked the set of his broad shoulders and the way he carried his head, and the shrewd but friendly light in his blue eyes.

"Come far?" she asked.

"From Natchez, by easy stages, Madam."

"Aimin' t' stay?"

"This is Red Boot, Madam?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'm aiming to stay." His smile was winning "Might we..."

"Come inside," Sary said, and turned again towards the cafe's interior.

"In a moment; my daughter..."

"I'm here, Father. Where comfort is, Eve's not far behind." The bonneted head was at his shoulders. A lovely young girl's face, with blue eyes and straight nose like his, but with rounder chin and forehead, and the color of youth, looked up at him. "Shall we accept the lady's invitation?"

As the man and girl disappeared through the swinging doors, Jed Chalmers shook his head and took another chew of tobacco. Then he settled again on his haunches and began thoughtfully to whittle.

After an interval of about ten minutes, during which a horse in the pack-train whinnied, three riders passed slowly down the street, and Jed spat twice, a heavy footstep approached from within the cafe and a boot nudged Jed's shoulder.

"Git away from here, Hob Weldon," Jed said disgustedly. "Yore pro'ly drunk agin."

"No I ain't," Hob replied. "Now git up. Ther's wu'k t' do."

JED LAID his stick carefully to one side, pocketed his knife, and faced the other man. The effect, to a stranger, would have been ludicrous. Hob was a mountain of a man, smooth-shaven, blue-chinned, with deep-set, glittering dark eyes and high cheekbones that proclaimed him part Indian. Jed on the other hand was small and light; a scrawny pink beard, shot with grey, hid most of his face, and his pop eyes

seemed watery and weak. The only resemblance between the two was their tattered and dusty clothing, and the six-gun each wore holstered at his right side. Quarrels between them were frequent, and carefully disregarded—at least in public. Hob lived up to his looks when it came to gunplay, and Jed belied his. It was general opinion that each feared the other.

Jed glared. "Whut wu'k?" he demanded.

Hob pointed at the pack-train. "Got to git all this located in Tom Baker's ol' shack. 'Sa a perntin' press."

"A whut?"

"A perntin' press. That hombre's gonta run a newspaper."

"Sary let'm?"

"Shore Sary let'm! 'Ud he do it ef'n she didn't?"

Jed sighed and stretched. "Awright. Let's go."

"The stuff in the wagon goes upstairs in the Palace—room six 'n' seven," Hob said.

THROUGH the cafe window, the Hunters and Sary watched the two men. "Yep," Sary was saying, "ol' Sary Weldon, they call me. But I'm not 's old 's I look. Runnin' this place fer nigh twenny years ages a pussun. Thet's my son, Hob, out thar. No 'count, he ain't. But come on. I'm jes' 'n ol' coot talks too much. Le's lookit yore rooms."

There were ten rooms in the Palace, facing on a balcony that overhung the main floor, five on one side and five at the rear, near the staircase. The rooms were small, but fairly enough furnished with iron bedstead, two chairs, a table, and a chest of drawers. As Sary pulled back the bolt on the door that inter-connected the two rooms, she said, "Hope yuh'll be comf'table. These rooms is over the faro-table layout downstairs—thet's the most quietest."

II

IT WAS Saturday evening, three days later—end-of-the month Saturday, payday Saturday—and the cafe was crowded with cowboys from a wide area: ranch-hands from the Bar Y over by the arroyo, from the Three-Z ranch up near Indian Territory, from the Bar B Bar near Sagebrush Creek Trail. The place was

jammed with good-humored men, pushing at the bar, lolling at tables over liquor or cards or small-talk, yelling encouragement from the foot of the little stage near the back of the room, where three weary-looking, bespangled "girls" attempted to dance to the music of a tinny piano, the discords of which were submerged in the louder surrounding clamor. Overhead, Old Sary's chandelier, the Palace's pride, decorated with hundreds of cheap, imitation crystals, swung and trembled, and clattered inaudibly. In a dark corner, Sary and Hob leaned over a table towards one another, trying to talk above the uproar.

"But whut for?" Hob was insisting. "Whut d'y' want with thet newspaper fella? It's pry, pry, pry, with nary a let-up. I heerd 'm askin' Doc Strong whut the must ailmint was, an' the Doc sez, 'Lead-pizinin'. He been hangin' 'roun' over to the stage office, an jawin' at the sheriff, an' 'bout ever'wheres."

"You jis' keep yore big mouth shut 'n' y' eyes open, Hob," Sary told him. "Di'n't yuh never hear o' the power o' the press?"

"Shore! Thet's whut I'm thinkin' of. Sooner er later he's boun'..."

"I got the wust fat-headed son of a fat-headed country!" Sary exclaimed, casting her eyes at the ceiling. "Hob. People is talkin' 'n' folks is wonderin' an' pryin'. But Hunter has took a right smart likin' tuh yore ol' maw. Calc'late he give a mite o' creditin' tuh what yore ol' maw's got tuh say, don't yuh?"

"Shore, Maw, but..."

"Wal, listen! Folks b'lieve whut they read in type. 'N' Hunter b'lieves whut I tell'm. Thet newspaper's comin' out purty soon, 'n 'folks'll buy it. This gol-durn country's jis' achin' fer readin'. Son! Th'll buy thet paper, 'n' read in it, an' it'll be gospel to'm. Th'll let Hunter do thur pryin' fer'm —an' Hunter'll ask me whar t' pry."

A smile wreathed Hob Weldon's face, and he patted Sary's hand. "Yore shore a wise cayuse, Maw," he admired.

'Shore. Shore I am. 'Sides, Hunter has thet Wilson prop'ty. Might sell. Now git yore wise cayuse a drink, son, 'cause she's shore thusty." And

mother and child parted for a moment in mutual esteem.

MEANWHILE, in his room above, Sam Hunter tried vainly to sleep amid the noise that he could feel no less than hear. Tossing in his bed for comfort, he suddenly went rigid, aware of a light that crept across the ceiling and down the opposite wall. He sat up suddenly, reaching as he did so for the holster on the chair beside him.

"Father?" a voice said, and he relaxed.

"Come in, Eve, dear," he invited. "That is—well, toss me the dressing-gown that's on the hook behind the door, will you?"

The girl laughed, and a moment later the rustle of the garment betrayed its passage. "All right, dear. Come in," Hunter said.

Eve entered, stopping at the little table to set down her lamp before she drew a chair to the bedside and seated herself. The fine points of her features were picked out sharply in the lamplight, so that, merely pretty by day, she looked beautiful now. The deepness of her eyes seemed more pronounced, and the subtle curve of her lips less childlike. A thin line of worry stood between her brows, and her slender figure drooped wearied-ly.

"You look tired, little flower," Hunter said. "That infernal racket..."

"No, it isn't that, Father," interrupted Eve. "It's—worry—about you, and us. There's too much for us. It isn't as though we won't try; we have tried so far. But that first edition seems far away as ever. How can we expect to publish a paper here? Who'll buy it? And there's so much to do, and so few people to help."

"NOW, DON'T worry, dear," her father consoled her. "Folks have been very helpful. And as soon as Butch learns what I'm teaching him about the presses, everything will be much easier. Remember, back in Natchez, when we thought we'd never print again? Remember when we were held up in Kansas? Remember, when we got here, how we thought we'd never sell the horses? Things right them-

selves, darling." He put an arm around her shoulders. "They want us here—they need us. Do you want to go back and take orders? Here we can build a free press in a free country, neither North nor South—a wild and untamed country, true, but one that will so much benefit from our work. Remember, dear, the old creed I taught you—that the press is the first educator, the first civilizer? Remember old John Gutenberg..."

"'...who with the labor of his heart and brain began our modern world'?" The girl laughed. "Yes, Father, I remember." She stroked his hand thoughtfully. "I know we're doing a good thing..."

"...perhaps a great thing."

"...perhaps a great thing. But I can't help thinking that if you could get some one to help—some one who knows..."

"But there is no one. Unless..."

"Unless?"

The elderly man shook his head. "No. No one."

Eve tilted up his chin with her hand. "Look at me, old and revered father," she commanded with mock severity. "Look at me and repeat that."

HE SMILED and took away her hand. "I was thinking of the son of a classmate of mine—a northerner. I know he was to do newspaper work, but I hardly think... It's been so long, and the war..."

Eve left his side, to come hurrying back in a moment with pen, inkstand, and paper. "His name, sweet pere?"

Hunter dictated and she wrote. When the letter was finished, he said, "It's no use, though, really, Eve. It couldn't be."

"At least we shall have hope," she said. "And that's better than trying to do the impossible when we know we can't."

"Yes," Hunter agreed. "I suppose it is. Now try to get some sleep, dear."

Eve pointed to a pitcher and tumblers on the table, which were dancing to the uproar below. "With that going on?"

"Try."

"I have a better idea." She sat on the bed beside him and put her hands lovingly on his shoulders. "Let's dress and join

them. If we can't silence the brutes, then isn't it best to enjoy their company?"

"That's no place for a lady, Eve."

"Father! After all these years knowing me, you call me a lady! Shame."

"I'm not joking, dear," he replied seriously.

"Neither am I," she responded merrily. "With your brawny arm to defend me...! Come, Father—just for tonight!"

He was silent for a moment. "Well—Oh, very well. But do be discreet, Eve."

She flounced from the room. "I'll be dressed right away," she called back. Then she reappeared. "Sorry—let me light your lamp for you."

WITH HER long, honey-colored hair done up in a high crown upon her head, and with her figure accentuated by a tight bodice and flowing skirt of lavender, Eve looked more beautiful than ever, and Sam Hunter pursed his lips in doubt when he looked up at her in response to her gay, "Let me help you with those boots, beloved and ancient!"

"I still think this is unwise, dear," he mused, as she knelt expertly to assist him.

"Oh Father, do stop worrying! I'm sure they're not any the less gentlemen for tending cattle."

"Many of them are drunk," he argued, "and I hardly think they're the gentlemen you've been used to, my dear. The country is civilization's border-line."

"There, all finished! Now, Father. Let's have no more nonsense. We'll stay on the right side of the border."

He sighed and rose. "I hope so," he said, taking her arm.

TO ENTER the cafe from above, father and daughter descend a long staircase at the rear, in full view of every one except those around the little stage. As they walked, silence followed them in a broadening wake, until only whispers and single notes of loud laughter, quickly choked off, reached them at the landing where the flight to the right left off and one to the left began.

Eve stopped short. Her nostrils trembled and her lips moved soundlessly for a moment. Then she spoke. "I'm

frightened. How they stare!"

"We can't go back now." her father whispered. "They expect us to come down."

"All right." The girl straightened her back and achieved a set smile. As they took their first further step down, a voice called out, "Howdy, Mr. Hunter."

Sam smiled. "That's Butch," he murmured. Eve nodded. "Howdy, Butch!" he replied.

The crowded group at the foot of the stairs parted silently to admit Sary Weldon. "Folks, I want y' to meet Sam Hunter and Eve Hunter. Remember thet name—Hunter. Sam's a-goin' tuh put thissere town on the map. Yessir, he's gittin' out a newspaper for us, an' Miss Eve's a-helpin' 'm. Called the *Clarion,* a right smart handle. Now—whut say?"

There were indistinguishable cries of approval and encouragement, with here and there a voice raised above the rest, yelling, "Good work, Sam!" or "Rah fer the *Clarion!*" Hunter smiled and raised his hand.

"Folks," he said, "I intend to give you a good newspaper, with all the news, honestly reported and catering to no man. It makes me happy to see so much good will in the people who will form the *Clarion's* public. You may be sure that we'll give the best that's in us."

This little speech was followed by another roar of approval, and Hunter and Eve came down to mingle with the crowd. Sary beckoned them to follow her to the table in the corner, and as they walked people whom they had previously met, and many whom they had not, stopped them momentarily to shake Hunter's hand or wish Eve good evening. Though some were bleary-eyed with drink and a few staggering, all seemed in good spirits, and Eve felt a flush of importance and pleasure mounting to her cheek as she smiled here, and there inclined her head.

HOB, A BOTTLE in his hand, greeted them at the table with a slap on the back for Hunter and a leer for Eve. He was obviously in his cups, and Sary ordered him, with some severity, to clear out and get a little fresh air. Smiling foolishly, he weaved away,

still brandishing the half-full bottle.

"Wall, how do yuh like our folks out here?" Sary wanted to know.

Hunter assured her that the company was more than suitable.

She wagged a finger at him coquettishly, her wrinkled face a mass of concentric circles as she smiled. "Yuh'll like it more," she prophesied, "When yuh git t' know us better." She gestured towards the opposite rear corner, where sundry wavings of the flimsy curtain proclaimed the beginning of a new stage show. "Ef'n yuh'll come with me," she offered, "I'll git yuh a special seat fer the show. Then I'll be leavin' yuh—the boys down the end o' the bar needs some cheerin', seems like."

Sam had his doubts about the suitability of the show for his daughter, but they proved to be unjustified. Sary drifted away; the show ended; and the two kept their seats, Eve enjoying herself boundlessly in the unusualness of the occasion, and Sam becoming increasingly worried. As the night grew older, the throng became more boisterous; a fiddler appeared from nowhere to join the old piano, and the men forced the giggling, half-tipsy entertainers to dance with them, or performed elephantine gyrations among themselves.

SINCE THE place was overcrowded to begin with, this action produced considerable commotion, with more than one intentional pushing-match, and a fist-fight that was quickly quelled by the bar-keep. Eve was brimming with excitement and incoherent exclamations, but Sam Hunter's eyes narrowed and he spoke less and less. Finally, he took Eve's wrist gently. "I think it's about time for us to retire, dear," he urged.

"Oh, no, Father! Just a while longer," she begged. "It's such fun!"

"We'd better go," he insisted.

"Well, then," she said, "wait until I find Sary, to say goodnight. She's been so kind. I'll be right back."

"Very well," he consented. "But hurry, dear."

Eve rose to her feet and began to elbow her way through

the milling crowd. Most of the men politely, if stumblingly, stepped aside; but when she had got midway in her precarious crossing, a shouting cowboy, playfully flung backwards by his companion, careened before her and suddenly fell at her feet, knocking her sprawling.

She was up instantly, furious with wounded dignity, but not before the cowboy had arisen and extended a hand—which she ignored—to help her. He swept his hat from his head and eyed the floor contritely. "I'm mighty sorry, ma'am," he gulped, "but yuh see, I—we was—I mean, it happened so sudden-like..."

"Well, of all the..." she began, and then, amused by his crestfallen manner, "I hope I didn't hurt you?"

"No, ma'am—I mean, I hope yore all right!"

His crisply curled dark hair, now tousled, and his frank, brown, puzzled eyes, gave him the appearance of a small boy in disgrace—an appearance emphasized by his stammering speech and the way his hands twisted nervously at his hat-brim. Eve smiled mischievously. "Do you think you could escort me to the door, then?" she asked.

"Mighty pleased, ma'am," he agreed quickly, taking her elbow.

BUT THEIR passage was abruptly interrupted by the emergence before them of Hob Weldon, by this time very drunk. "Jinin' us, li'l lady?" he inquired with what was meant to pass for a friendly grin. "Come on 'n' dance w' 'n' ol' fren'!" And he clutched Eve forcibly by the waist, beginning a grotesque jig.

The cowboy forced his way between them. "Jis' a minute, Hob," he said slowly. "Yuh fergit I'm takin' care o' the lady."

With one huge paw, Hob thrust him roughly aside. "Don' ain tuh have no trouble with yuh, Bob Bates," he growled. "Now, step ashide—ashide—like a ge'm'n, or'n yuh'll git hurted." He grasped again for Eve.

During the speech, Eve had tried to edge away. Now she struggled. "Let me go, Hob!" she pleaded. "You're hurting me!" But he only clutched her

tighter, and yelled, "Make thet music faster, thar!"

THERE WAS a swift movement and a loud smacking sound, and Eve felt herself flung back against the bar, free of Hob, who was on his knees on the floor, his hand to his face and an ugly look in his little eyes. Over him, his fists still clenched, stood Bob Bates. "Yore not fitten tuh be in the same room with her," he was saying through clenched teeth.

Hob rose to his feet glowering, and an atmosphere of tenseness electrified the room. Those nearest the two men pushed backward, while those behind edged closer. Some one banged the cover of the piano down over the keys, making a harsh jangling sound. With that noise, silence fell instantly, as if the lights had all gone out at once. Wavering between indignation and panic, and dizzy with excitement, Eve caught a glimpse of her father trying to make headway towards her through the crowd.

"Yore too free with yore hands, Bates," Hob said softly as he got up. "Yep—'n' too free with yore mouth, too."

Bates, white with anger, only glared at the larger man.

"Now git!" Hob commanded.

"I aim tuh see the lady tuh whar she's goin'," Bates said.

Rage contorted Hob's features monstrously. "Git," he bellowed, "afore I break yuh in half, yuh little varmint!"

Bates' hand edged towards his holster. "I aim tuh see the lady tuh the door," he repeated breathlessly.

The two men faced each other now, and the breath of the rest in the room seemed to come in unison. The silence was so deep that the tinkling of the crystals in the still swaying chandelier could be heard. An arm crept around Eve's shoulders, and she leaned back gratefully against her father, but her eyes remained riveted in terror upon the two antagonists.

"Stop them!" Her voice was an imperative whisper, but Hunter shook his head. "It's the West," he explained. "There is no way."

Hob stood with his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt. "An' I aim tuh dance with her," he

growled. "I reckon yuh git out—alone."

Bates' hand was trembling, and the sweat stood out on his upper lip, but he held his ground.

"Git!" Hob repeated.

Bates remained motionless, except for the hand that edged ever closer to his gun-butt. Hob began to step forward; there was a double roar of guns, and Eve hid her head, with a stifled sob, in her father's shoulder.

AS IF BY magic, Sary Weldon appeared and pushed Hob aside. Instantly his attitude changed. "'Twarn't nothin' Maw," he whined. "Jis' a kinda fren'ly argyment, like. He ain't hurt bad."

Wordlessly, Sary knelt down and uncovered young Bates' shoulder. "Git Doc Strong," she ordered, and Hob vanished like a shadow. Half to herself, Sary went on, "Bar B Bar outfit, ain't yuh? Git a wagon—no, better wait on Doc Strong."

"Don't want tuh bother yuh none, ma'am," Bates said in a strained voice.

"'Tain't no bother." Sary looked meaningfully at Martin. "All the rooms is full, an' they's mos'ly drunk," she hinted.

"Glad to help out," Hunter said. "The young man is welcome to share my room."

"We'll move in an extry tick."

Eve impulsively grasped Bates' arm as others helped him to his feet. "Thank you," was all she said, but her voice shook, and Bob smiled at what he hoped he saw in her eyes.

III

THE FOLLOWING day, as Doctor Strong was leaving he looked over his shoulder with a grin at Bob and Eve.

"Seems the young lady c'n take good care o' yuh, young feller," he said. Then, to Eve, "'Member, now—change them dressin's ever' eight hours till I c'n make it over here agin. An' don't let him exercise none, hear?"

"Yes, Doctor," she agreed. "I'll—I'll read to him."

Doc Strong winked. "Wisht I was in yore shoes, young feller," he said, and left.

"It's mighty kind tuh he'p me thissaway, ma'am," Bob

said earnestly when he had gone, "but I don't aim tuh bother yuh none."

Eve's eyes twinkled. "You said the same to Mrs. Weldon. No, it's no bother at all," she assured him. "It's the least I can do after the help you were to me—for one thing."

"Don't mention it, ma'am. 'Twarn't nothin'."

"But it was! That beast, Hob! He really hurt me, and he smelled—Ugh!" She made a wry face, and Bob laughed.

"That's h o s s e s, ma'am—sweat an' hosses. Though I calc'late Hob don't know w'en it's Sattidy, nowhow!"

"You were very brave."

He squirmed in embarrassment, and laughed again. "I reckon I was a mite foolish, too, ma'am," he said mischievously, "seein' how things come out."

She smiled at this, but was instantly serious again. "I don't see why they had to come out this way," she pondered. "Isn't there a law..."

"No, ma'am. Ther might be a law, but thuz nobody tuh make it stick. Out here we have th' only kind o' law we kin. It wuks—us'ally."

"But the sheriff? Doesn't he...?"

"No, ma'am. Sheriff's busy 'nough as 'tis, with cattle bein' pizened an' feed stolen, an' ranch-houses bein' fired. This ain't quiet country."

"Oh, I know, but—It isn't what's done, it's the way—Will you stop calling me 'ma'am,' like a w h o l e flock of silly sheep!"

"Yes, ma'am—I mean, Miss Hunter."

"This is a book of Emerson's poetry. Do you know Emerson?"

"Emerson?" Bob repeated innocently. "Yuh mean Sam Emerson over by Juniper Gap, er the Sage of Concord?"

IN A SHACK at the end of the street, Sam Hunter and Jed Chalmers were setting up type together, while Hunter's helper, Butch, labored at mixing ink.

"It's most fortunate I found out about you, Jed," Hunter was saying. "Wherever did you learn this trade?"

"Yuh larn 'most ever'thin'," Jed replied, "ef'n yuh keep yore ears open an' yore eyes awake."

Hunter looked at him sharply. "That was cryptic, Jed," he remarked.

"Might be." Jed returned his look and grinned. "Might be, Sam."

Hunter changed the subject. "Can you read proof?"

"Yep."

The publisher handed him a newly printed galley, and he sat down at the lone rickety desk to read.

After a few moments, he marked his place with a pencil and glanced at the other man shrewdly. "Mighty startlin' editorial, Sam," he said. "Cud be some folks might be techy 'bout it."

"Do you think so?" Hunter asked with a faint smile.

"Yep. Whar'd yuh git this information?"

"Sheriff, mostly."

"Sheriff!" Jed spat disgustedly. "Ig'erent varmint don't know tuh come in out o' the rain."

"Indeed? I thought he knew his business."

"Business!" Jed spat again. "He's jis' a cattleman, 'n' thet's all he'll ever be. Didn't he tell yuh whut's behind this pizenin' an' arson?"

"Some kind of land war," he said."

"Land war! Shore! But why?"

Hunter's brow furrowed. "I'm sure I have only the faintest idea. Do you know?"

JED DID not answer the question directly. "Whar's all the trouble? Looky here." He pointed out the front window. "Thar's a strip o' land runs from the Palace Cafe to Windy Mesa, thutty mile thataway. Thar's the trouble—Bar B Bar, Lazy B, Triple X, an' Y-Cross ranches, mos'ly. East lies Wichita, wes' is Santa Fe. Now yuh know."

"Just a moment." Hunter considered. "You mean a railroad's coming through?"

"Don't mean no'hin'. But some one's buyin' land in thet strip at low prices."

"Who?"

Jed scraped his knuckles thoughtfully across his sparsely covered head. "Differ'nt men," he said finally. "Stay at the Palace f'r a coupla days er a week, 'n' go away. Never see'm agin. Mite strange."

"You mean," Hunter prompted, leaning over excitedly,

"they probably represent some one, big interest..."

"Shore."

"Couldn't we discover through the bank...?"

"Bank!" Jed almost swallowed his chew. "Listen, Sam. One pusson owns thet bank—yep, an' owns the Palace an' 'bout ever' one in town, 'cep'in' you 'n' me—'n' the sheriff, but he's no-'count."

"Who's that?"

"Sary Weldon."

Hunter relaxed and laughed shortly. "Old Sary? Why, she wouldn't harm a fly. Did you see the way she took care of young Bates? No, Jed, you must be mistaken."

Jed turned back to his proofreading. "Don't never say I didn't warn yuh," he murmured.

AFTER SOME minutes of silence, Hunter interrupted him. "Just a minute, Jed."

The old man didn't look up. "Yep?"

"How could it be? Hasn't any one ever seen these arsonists and thieves?"

"Not an' lived tuh tell," Jed responded laconically.

"You mean they were killed? But that would require an investigation, and surely after all this time..."

"'Tain't the kind uh 'vestigation yuh think, Sam," Jed said. "People ain't killed, 'zackly. Jis' sorta disappears."

"You mean they never return—the bodies are never recovered?"

"Yep. Ef'n there is bodies. Same happens tuh the stage, sometimes—w'en she carries gold. Jis' disappears. 'Roun' by Windy Mesa."

"But something should be done!"

"Shore! Whut?"

"We'll see."

Butch Hapgood, Hunter's man-of-all-work, was an undersized, weaselly chap, with a weak chin, protuberant eyes, and half-bald, sand-haired, narrow head. He seemed intent upon his job, but the two men, if they had watched him, might have seen him stop from time to time to scratch his ear reflectively, like a man with a heavy problem.

"SO," SAM HUNTER was explaining to Bob Bates

and his daughter, "old Jed might be just a fake, but I'm almost convinced that he's on the right track, at least as far as motive is concerned. I still can't believe that Mrs. Weldon has anything to do with the crooked scheme, but I've checked up on most of Jed's facts and found them to be true. The sheriff is skeptical—is inclined to think the trouble is the work of some gang that escapes with its prisoners to Indian Territory. Most others think the same. But I don't know." He drew a long breath.

"It sounds dangerous, Father..." Eve said, "...but exciting. How are you going to treat it in the paper?"

Hunter smiled and his voice was eager. "It's news, Eve—great news; though every one knows about it, they'll relish reading of it. And I'm going to print a strong editorial urging the Cattlemen's Association to do something effectual about it. I'll treat the story as a plot—which I'm sure it must be. If I can arouse enough public opinion among the ranchers, whoever is in back of these things will be forced to stop—or at least come out into the open, when faced by organized opposition."

"I reckon thet's a good i-dea, Mr. Hunter," Bates approved. "They's been talk fer months 'bout th' Association sendin' a range detective, but they's so many private feuds a-goin' on I don't s'pose much is been done."

"And what is more," Hunter went on, "after the paper is published tomorrow, I intend to go out to Windy Mesa to examine the terrain personally. Something might be evident to my unaccustomed eye that would remain invisible to those well acquainted with the place."

"I'd be mighty pleased to go along, sir." Bates suggested eagerly.

"No," Hunter smiled. "You stay here to entertain Eve. You're not well enough to ride. I may have Jed accompany me."

"But, Father," Eve protested, "I thought I could go along with you!"

"No, dear. It's best for you to remain at home, here."

Eve said, "Yes, Father," demurely, but there was a dangerous light in her eyes.

THE FOLLOWING day, the first edition of the *Clarion* was ready for distribution. There was not much market in Red Boot, though Sam Hunter and Eve, Butch Hapgood and Bob, did their best to drum up business. Three copies went to the Palace, and about a dozen and a half others were sold in various stores and to passers-by; but Red Boot was not a residential community, and there were not many regular inhabitants to buy.

"In the future," Hunter told his daughter. "I'll know better and publish on Saturdays, when there are likely to be more people in town. Right now, I'll have to go from ranch to ranch, peddling; and this makes as good an opportunity as any to visit Windy Mesa. Have you seen Jed?"

"I think he's out gathering brushwood for Sary. Do be careful, Father."

"Don't worry dear." He had his horse saddled, and, with a number of copies of the *Clarion* in his saddlebags, mounted. "I'll be back by nightfall," he called back as he rode away.

But Eve felt a cold wave of premonition pass over her as he disappeared down the trail. Finding Bob's comforting hand near hers, she pressed it gratefully.

THE AFTERNOON passed slowly for Eve, even in the company of the adoring Bob Bates, who was content for the most part, however, to adore silently. Having persuaded her to read to him again, he sat slouched against the railing outside the Palace Cafe, gazing up at her in worshipful affection as she sat primly beside him in a rickety chair, the book in her lap. Reaching the end of a paragraph, she closed the book and let it slide from her hand, meanwhile gazing across the street with a faraway stare.

"Whut's the trouble, Miss Eve?" inquired the alert Bob.

"I beg your pardon?"

"No offense. Whut's the trouble?"

"Oh! I do wish Father were home!"

Bob smiled and relaxed. "Oh, it'll be a whiles, yet, ma'am; he's got a heap o' visitin' tuh do."

"I know, and you're very

comforting, Bob," she said, "but—may I borrow your horse?"

Bob rose. "Whut fer, Miss—ef yuh don't min' muh askin'?"

"I think I'll go to meet him at Windy Mesa. It would be nice to ride back into town with him."

"But thet's thutty miles, Miss," he argued. "An' lonely country. It's no place fer a lady like you. Ef'n I cud ride with yuh..."

"You can't," she said. "You know that, Bob."

"O'course I know it. But yore father tole me tuh take care o' yuh, Miss Eve, an' I dont' aim tuh let yuh skedaddle thataway by y'se'f."

She patted his cheek. "What a faithful young man you are! Now, would you mind taking this book inside for me and—oh, yes!—telling me what time it is? You'll find a watch on the table in Father's room."

"Mighty pleased."

"Oh—and if you'll get my cape for me—it's—the weather—"

"Yes ma'am—Miss Eve. Pronto." And he vanished into the cafe.

SHE WATCHED closely until he had gone upstairs, then hurried behind the building to the stables. He arrived back just in time to see her gallop rapidly, without a look behind, in the direction of Windy Mesa. In surprise and consternation, he remained motionless for a moment, then ran to the sheriff's office.

The sheriff was not impressed. "She'll meet him on the way back, son," he drawled. "Now, don't worry. Twaren't yore fault."

Bob slouched from the office, his head down, thinking. Laboriously he climbed the Palace Cafe steps and slumped down against the railing. He glanced sorrowfully at the empty chair beside him, shook his head, compressed his lips; then, with a yawn, he settled himself more comfortably and closed his eyes.

Eve's departure had caught the eyes of two more interested witnesses. Jed Chalmers paused in his hauling of brushwood at the end of town, to look up sharply and note the absence of riding habit and the direction she was taking. From his vest he extracted an old, turnip-

shaped watch. Glancing at it, he pursed his lips in concentration, and, leaving the brushwood, hurried in turn to the stables.

And Butch Hapgood, lolling in the doorway of the *Clarion* office, noticed her also. He gazed after her for a while, then, hitching up his gun-belt, he ran down the street towards the Palace. His racing footsteps, as he clattered into the building, failed to rouse Bob Bates from slumber.

IV

EVE HAD not gone very far from Red Boot before the sound of a distant *haloo* came to her ears. Reining in her horse, she looked about, and was alarmed to see a rider in the distance waving to her and evidently following her trail. Reminded of stories she had heard of the dangers this open country held for lone women, she again put hell to her horse, and urged him to greater effort with the slapping of her reins. Though she was riding side-saddle and so in constant danger of a fall, at the rate she was going, her experience in riding kept her comparatively secure in the wide western saddle; and as she was light and on a good horse, she soon outdistanced her pursuer.

A lump of fear and indecision was rising in her throat, however, for she knew that if she turned back, the person following might cut her off. Her best chance lay in meeting her father, but she might very well miss him, en route, especially if he had been detained at any of the ranches he had been visiting. Envisioning capture and its possible consequences on one hand, and being lost in rough country on the other, she was almost overcome by terror, and the horse, feeling her loosened grip, took the bit in his teeth and fairly flew northward along the trail.

After riding in this manner until she had lost all track of time, she was startled when the horse slowed down to a walk, his chest heaving and his flanks wet and steaming with perspiration. She found herself at the crest of a gentle slope, and, looking quickly around, was able to distinguish the man following her as a distant speck

back along the trail. Windy Mesa itself loomed large and forbidding before her in the opposite direction, and she drew a breath of relief when she noticed at its base a group of men on horseback. Pulling up, she allowed her horse time to retrieve his breath for the ride onwards. She determined to wait until the pursuing rider was again within hailing distance.

WATCHING him closely as he approached, she was more and more struck by the resemblance of his manner when riding to some one she knew. Quickly she ran over in her mind the names of acquaintances she had made in Red Boot, and finally, when he had come close enough to call to her again, she realized who it was—Jed Chalmers. The recognition had scarcely occurred when she was startled by the sound of gun-fire.

Turning once more towards Windy Mesa, she saw with alarm that the mounted men had surrounded a stage, which had come up from out of sight in the interval during which she had been watching Jed. She could see distinctly the grayish smoke from the guns; but in a moment it was all over, and the stage and men began to make a turn off the road around to the other side of the mesa. The stage, she could see, was ablaze, and soon abandoned; but now one man broke away from the group, riding hell-for-leather, and closely chased by three others.

Quivering with excitement, she didn't know which way to turn, but by now Jed had come up close and was yelling to her.

"Git headed fer home, Eve," he cried. "Yuh see why yuh shouldn't come out this way!" And, spurring his horse, he headed directly for the fleeing rider, who had veered around in their direction.

But Eve did not move; she could not. All at once, fear for her father, rather than for herself, enveloped her. Suppose he had been caught in that hold-up? She shivered at the thought and felt the reins go cold and heavy in her hands. Then, with a thrill of joy, she recognized the escaping horse as her father's—and once again was assailed by icy doubt when she

saw that it was not her father riding.

JED AND the rider were now abreast, and she shuddered as Jed opened fire and one of the pursuing horsemen dropped from his saddle. The other two stopped and returned fire; Jed handed the stranger a gun and he, too, began to shoot. In a moment, positions were reversed; the hold-up men turned tail and galloped back towards the mesa. There, two of their companions joined then, and all four began to head back again towards where the two men faced them.

Jed and the stranger held a hurried colloquy, then set out in Eve's direction. "Back to town," Jed yelled at her, and, turning her horse, she joined them. For a few breathtaking minutes they rode desperately, hearing guns behind them and seeing bullets kick up dust at their horses' feet, but before long the gunmen gave up the chase, allowing them to give their winded horses a chance to proceed at a more leisurely pace.

Eve turned her attention first to the stranger, a slender young man with a little moustache, dressed in the height of eastern fashion except for his absent hat, and carrying—of all things! Eve thought—a light malacca cane that he had refused to relinquish in his fight. After the first silent moment of inner surprise at his outlandish dress, she deluged him with questions about her father: "That's my father's horse you're riding. Did you see him? How did you get the horse? Where was..."

"Just a moment, just a moment!" he interrupted. "I'm not quite sure what you're talking about, Miss, but I feel the answers must be, unfortunately, 'No.' I picked the only horse available, and I assure you I was glad to find him so."

"But how did you happen to be there? Tell us about it," she insisted.

HE SMILED, cocking an inquiring eyebrow at her, and reached for his hat before he discovered with some embarrassment that it was not there. "Permit me first to introduce myself," he said. "My

name is Abel Hathaway, and I was coming..."

"Your name is what?"

His eyebrows swung up another notch. "Abel Hathaway, Miss. I was..."

"Abel Hathaway?"

"Why—yes. Is the name familiar to you?"

"But surely! But how could you have— It was only a few days ago—Did you receive our letter?"

"Letter? No. What do you mean?"

"Well, only a few days ago, my father and I wrote to you, asking you to come... Tell me, were you intending to visit Red Boot?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I was," he replied wonderingly. "Some people there by the name of Hunter..."

"I'm Eve Hunter!"

"Well! How do you do?" His attempted bow nearly threw him from his horse, and, despite the seriousness of the moment, Eve could not restrain a little giggle of amusement.

"That's my father's horse you're riding," she went on. "Did you see anything of him? Tall—florid—white hair?"

"I'm sorry, no. You see, we were in the stage—then the attack—and in the melee I was lucky enough to obtain this horse—though" he added sorrowfully, "I'm afraid I had to strike the man who was holding him rather heavily, to get him. It must have been that one, that shot my hat off."

Jed, who had been following all this closely, here asked a question for himself. "D' yuh reckon yuh could identify any o' the critters?"

Hathaway, who was riding between the two, turned to him. "I'm sorry, no," he answered. "You saw they were all wearing masks. And by the way—I owe you my thanks for aiding me to escape and possibly saving my life."

"F'git it," Jed said. "What gits me is whar th'll go to. Ain't nothin', way they was headed, fer nigh three hundred mile."

"What's this about a letter, Miss Hunter?" Abel Hathaway asked.

She told him. "What a remarkable coincidence!" he exclaimed when she had finished. "The letter and I must have crossed in passage. My father, you understand, Miss Hunter,

is dead. and on his death-bed he had me promise to go south to see if I could be of any assistance to your parents. He hadn't heard of arrival, I believe."

"Or of my mother's departure. I never knew her; she died when I was born. Father is all I have left."

"I see. Yes. Well—I did find out that upon two occasions—once in college, while swimming, and once shortly afterwards, during the Mexican War—your father had saved my father's life. Of course I acceded to his request to find you and offer my services. I was directed out here when I failed to reach you in Natchez. And I was admiring your lovely country, thinking how good the dry air and sunshine must be for health, when a bullet missed my head by a scant inch. I believe you know the rest of the story."

"She does," Jed replied for her, "but the sheriff will be mighty interested in hearin' it agin."

"And I'll be glad to relate it," Hathaway said agreeably. "I had heard of outlaws, but never expected to see them so bloodthirsty, and in broad daylight. There was no 'Hands up!" about it; they merely came shooting."

"An' thets' the way th'll go son," Jed assured him. "Thet's the way th'll go."

AFTER THE three had reached Red Boot and made their experiences clear to the sheriff, Hathaway succeeded in dissuading Eve from returning to Windy Mesa with a hastily formed posse. "It's hardly likely," he reasoned, "that your father should have reached that far in the time he was gone. Probably his horse got loose while he was visiting some ranchhouse, and followed the road back towards Red Boot. It goes past Windy Mesa, I understand. And it was doubtless mere coincidence that horse, outlaws, and stage happened to be at the same place at one time."

Eve was unconvinced, but found in his tone of voice and the way he looked at her, for the first time really in her life, authority that had to be obeyed. His clothing and manner of precise speech caused smiles and amused whisperings

among some of the Red Boot citizens, but Eve was aware of a light in his brown eyes that betold strength of character and purpose. So she promised to remain behind in the care of the apologetic Bob Bates, while Abel—never for a moment giving up his cane—joined the group on its way northward.

By the time the posse reached Windy Mesa it was dark. The still smoldering stage was found, and nearby some articles of personal apparel—among them Hathaway's luggage—and a rifled mail-sack. There were no signs of life, and the hoof-prints of the thieves had been carefully obliterated. The sheriff determined to come back on the morrow and search further afield, and Jed was somewhat surprised to find Hathaway, leaning against his trunk, making what seemed to be voluminous notes in a little book that he carried in his inside coat pocket.

On the way back to Red Boot, Hathaway began to lag a bit behind the others, beckoning Jed to accompany him. "You seem to be particularly alert," he said, "despite—no offense meant—despite your appearance. Perhaps you can give me an account of the background of these instances of murder and disappearance. From what I have overheard others say, they seem a not unusual occurrence."

Jed obliged, giving the young man a full account of the six months' record of pillage and killings, and not forgetting to include remarks anent the railroad and Sary Weldon. Hathaway nodded thoughtfully.

"Mr. Hunter was aware of these affairs, as you have outlined them to me?"

"Shore war. You 'n' him's the on'y two I yawed tuh."

"I see. Look here." By the light of a match, Hathaway showed Jed some spots of blood of his horse's neck. "It may be that Mr. Hunter is no more," he interpreted solemnly, "but I shouldn't relish the task of breaking the news to his daughter. You seem to know her rather well; suppose we say you're delegated."

"Ev'dence ain't conclusive," Jed spat.

HATHAWAY eyed him sharply. "And why, may I

ask you, are you so interested in conclusive evidence? It seems evidence enough to me."

Jed did not reply.

"I shall have to tell her then, myself."

"Now listen, young feller! Thet pore gal has 'nough tuh worry on as 'tis. You jis' let her be. Savvy?"

Hathaway was silent for a moment. Then he retorted, "I'm blamed if I can see the basis for your interest in the Hunters! Seems to me I'm more in a position to decide upon such matters."

"I'm jis' fren'ly-like. Look here, Hath'way—yuh don't want tuh make thet gal onhappy, now, do yuh?"

"I should think the suspense would be as bad as worse than the knowledge!"

"Mebbe yer right. Yore a right sharp 'un fer a youngster!"

"Thank you." Hathaway gave way to a grin. "And you're right sharp for an old 'un," he said. "It would take a lot of convincing to make me believe you are what you appear to be."

"Some of us hev our pe-culiar ways," was all Jed would answer to this thrust.

Hathaway was frankly puzzled with the old man's position in the affair, but finally decided that taking his advice could do no harm for the present. So, in spite of the argument, he neglected to mention his fears about her father to Eve. Early the next morning he departed with the sheriff, Jed, and two deputies, to once more examine the scene of yesterday's crime.

WINDY MESA was a high, rocky promontory nearly a half mile long, about one third that wide at its widest place, and some sixty feet high for the most part, though here and there a quartzite vein stood clear of the mass, and aspired higher in misshapen gothic arches. The entire outcropping was roughly pear-shaped. The southern side, towards Red Boot, was absolutely bare of growth, but the opposite side supported some plant life, particularly at the concave center part, where a portion of softer rock had long since crumbled away into dusty soil. Here grew some saw-edged

prairie grass, a few clumps of mesquite, and, dominating the rest, a grotesque, large-trunked juniper.

The whole formation, made of rock which had resisted corrosion better than the red sandstone of the surrounding country, was a purplish gray, with chalky vertical streaks. The strata lines showed clearly, giving the mesa a kind of architecturally-planned appearance, a possibility of cathedral-like grandeur marred by its squatness and the uneven character of the line it made against the sky.

Abel Hathaway regarded the pile somberly, and made more notes in his little book. When the others scattered off to survey the surrounding area, he refused to go with them, remaining to poke about with his cane among the rubble at the mesa's base.

WHEN, THREE hours later, the rest of the party returned empty-handed, they found him perched soberly, like a tail-coated gargoyle, on the highest, flat jut of rock atop the formation. One elbow was on the adjoining knee, and his chin rested on that fist. With his other hand, he was describing little cuts and twists with his cane. When they hailed him, he started as if awakened from sleep, and scrambled down. Only Jed failed to laugh at his ludicrous appearance.

"Find somethin'?" the old man inquired.

"Enough," said Hathaway, mounting his horse, "to see that, if what you've told me is true, we're starting our investigation at the wrong end."

Back in Red Boot at this time, Bob Bates was trying to amuse Eve. Puns and rope-spinning having failed, he sat down beside her and said consolingly, "Now yuh jis' watch thet street, an' purty soon he'll come a-ridin' in as good as new."

She turned to him with a smile, but her eyes were dull. Laying her hand on his, she returned, "Thank you sincerely, Bob, for trying to make me feel better. But you know as well as I that there's no hope. I know he's gone—disappeared like the others." Here her girlish chin thrust forward. "But I'm not going to give up, Bob. We came out here to run a pa-

per, and a paper's going to be run. And I'll never give up writing about this until whoever is responsible is brought to justice."

"I'd be proud tuh he'p yuh—Eve." Bob said with mingled determination and shyness. "Don't seem tuh me this dude jis' come out's goin' tuh be much use."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Bob," she replied with a distant look. "I think I may be able to rely a good deal on Mr. Abel Hathaway." There was laughter in her eyes depite her heavy heart, when she saw how viciously Bob kicked at an innocent pebble.

V

NIGHT HAD fallen, and with it had come the denizens of the night; the kangaroo rat foraged for its meager fare, and coyotes stalked their prey. But not only four-footed animals were awake. Within the town of Red Boot, two-legged creatures crept their stealthy ways among the habitations of men.

In the gloom that was the interior of the Palace Cafe, now a vast cavern of soft darkness broken here and there by harder forms that might—and might not—have been chairs and tables, the only light was the faint sparkle that went lambently from one to another facet of the many crystals in the chandelier. But though there was little light, the darkness was broken by many sounds: the creaking of boards, like small, protesting voices, and the swift, momentary rustle in little marauding feet along the walls. Every so often, some imperceptible force would cause the chandelier to sway, and tiny tinkles, like a chorus of distant, ghostly bells, broke forth.

And now there was another sound, a grating and squeaking unlike the rest; and another form was dimly discernible. A sensitive ear might have detected breathing that caught from time to time as if in terror, and muffled noise, once, of a low, strained voice. This was followed by a succession of sharp, straining sounds that in the near-silence reverberated like pistol-shots. And the dim form disappeared.

ONCE INSIDE the Weldons' private office, the lock of which he had carefully picked, Abel Hathaway heaved a sigh of relief, and, after some groping, succeeded in finding a lamp. With this in his hand, he tiptoed to the grimy little window and pulled the shade, after which he lit the lamp and placed it on the roll-top desk.

Abel was fully dressed, even to his cane, which he tucked under his arm as he went methodically about his work. Patiently he searched the place. Every paper he found, he examined carefully. A strong-box which successfully resisted his attempts upon its lock, he put back again into its cupboard as he had found it. Surveying the room for a moment, he shook his head in disappointment, this turned his attention to the roll-top desk. Here also his efforts were in vain; for though it could have been opened by main force, he meant to leave no marks.

His hand characteristically to his chin, he paused to consider, then extinguishing the lamp, he departed silently.

At the same time, another figure, more clear than his, advanced slowly along the balcony that surrounded the cafe's interior. Intent upon his own progress, however, he failed to see it, but was noticed himself as a vagrant moon-ray silhouetted his form departing through the swinging doors.

Quickly as possible, Abel made his way around to the rear of the cafe, and began to thresh thoroughly with his cane through the heavy grasses there. Hardly had his sharp intake of breath and quickly straightened figure announced that he had found what he was looking for, when a woman's shriek echoed and re-echoed through the hollow building.

Instantly he raced back into the cafe through the front entrance. Doors around the balcony had clattered open, the occupants of the rooms—Sary and Hob Weldon, Bob Bates and two itinerant tradesman, had appeared with lamps. The door to Eve's room remained ominously closed.

Bounding up the stairs toward her room, Abel was intercepted by Hob, who shouldered him contemptuously aside, and knocked on the door. It opened,

revealing Eve, with a lamp, in her dressing-gown.

"Whut's up, Miss Hunter?" Hob asked solicitously.

"N-nothing," she replied. "I —I'm sorry to have disturbed you. Please forgive me. I—I was—I had a bad dream, that's all. Please—go back to sleep. I have been—I am—very worried, and—and I had a bad dream. I'm sorry." All this while, Abel noticed, she had been staring at him with mixed astonishment and horror; there was no mistaking the look, nor the reason for it. He was the only fully dressed person there. The others also noticed it, and he felt called upon to explain.

Trying to brush aside an absurd but awkward feeling of guilt, he began, "I was out for —a little walk. It has been a dis—disturbing day for me also. I—I..." He stopped, flushed with embarrassment. The guilty stammer would not disappear.

Hob towered over him menacingly. "I don't know whut yer eastern i-deas o' manners is," he growled, "but in these here parts, we respect our women-folks, an'..."

"But it's nothing like that!" Eve interceded. "It's only—only—Please, Hob!"

"On'y whut, Miss Eve?"

"N-nothing."

"'S I was sayin', Mister Hathaway—we don't like you nor we don't like whut yuh do, an' yuh kin clear out—pronto!"

"Somethin' fishy 'bout thet hombre," Bob Bates added. "'Member he hed yore paw's horse, Miss Eve. Ain't never nobody 'scaped from them hold-ups before."

Eve looked from Hob to Bates in desperate appeal. "Let me think," she begged breathlessly.

ABEL COULD feel his embarrassment changing to rage. "But it's perfectly ridiculous! Do I look the kind of man who..."

"Yuh don't look like any kind o' man," Hob sneered. "Don't forgit. Yuh hev till t'morrer tuh git out o' town."

Abels' jaw hardened and his voice was low. "Suppose I refuse?"

Hob laughed once. "Yuh'll go. Feet fust, mebbe."

"But Hob!" This was Eve, in an intensity of emotion.

"You don't understand. I can't explain, but—Please don't do anything that... Oh, Hob, leave him be, it's all right."

Abel raised his eyebrows at this. What could the girl mean? Something had frightened her, of that he could be sure; but what? She thought, too, that he was behind it, whatever it was. Then why did she come to his defense?

Hob laid his hairy paw on her shoulder in what he may have considered big-brotherly fashion. "Now, don't you worry none, Miss Eve," he leered. "We got a way o' takin' keer o' varmints like him in Red Boot. Ther won't be no trouble, 'n' ther won't be no talk." He glanced around belligerently. "No talk, unnerstan'?" The two salesman nodded eager obedience and Sary smiled. Edging over to Eve, she put her arm around the girl. "Now dearie," she comforted, "you jis' leave the men to wuk thin's out fer theirselfs, an' tell yore ol' Aunt Sary ever'thin'."

At this demonstration of affection, Eve burst into irrepressible tears, and, yielding to the old woman's urging, went into the room with her. Sary nodded understandingly to the others, smiled, scowled blackly once at Abel, and closed the door.

Hob once more addressed the easterner. "I'm mighty easy on yuh, Hathaway. Luky yuh wasn't strung up. Yuh got till ten t'morrer tuh git."

"You want me out of town for some reason," Abel retorted, "and I'm going to stay till I find out why. Considering I had nothing to do with this affair, I can't thank you for your generosity. And I don't intend to 'git'!"

"Y'll git er git took," Hob warned, and, turning on his slippered heel, left the group. The salesmen, with many backward glances, sidled off. Now only Bob Bates faced Abel.

"Well," Abel said lightly, "so there's something fishy about me, is there?"

"Yes, ther is!"

"Suppose," Abel suggested, "we go to your room for a little chat."

Bob hesitated. Abel smiled. "I'm unarmed," he said.

"Wal," Bob agreed grudgingly, "a' right. But it'll hev tuh be a good yarn tuh spin, Hathaway!"

Abel laughed a little. "It will be." he assured him. "Come on."

ALTHOUGH Eve was aware of the suspicion cast by Jed upon the Weldons, she responded with confidence to the ministrations of Sary. Feeling herself alone, betrayed by the capable Abel Hataway, and unable to receive any real help from the well-meaning but handicapped and incompetent Bob Bates, she turned for sympathy and advice to the older woman, who was quite willing and indeed eager to give it.

"Now, don't yuh worry none 'bout this, honey," Sary reassured her. "Hob'll take keer o' thet scoun'rel an' he won't bother yuh no more."

"But Sary it isn't that." the bewildered girl replied. "And I'm afraid—You must n't let anything happen to Abel!"

Sary appeared astonished. "Arter whut he done? Air yuh crazy, child? Yuh orter be willin' tuh see him daid!"

"No, no! He didn't..." the girl fumbled at her bosom—"he didn't annoy me. I screamed when—when I read this. It was pushed under my door. I—it says not to show it to any one—but..." impulsively she thrust forward a many-folded scrap of paper.

Silently, Sary scaned the letter. "Yuh mean tuh go th'u with it?" she inquired softly.

"Oh—I don't know! It seems so cowardly—and yet..."

"I think we kin he'p yuh," Sary said slowly. "Yuh—leave thissere with us, 'n' perten' tuh do whut it says. We'll see yuh arterwards."

"You—you think that would help?" Eve asked, wide-eyed.

"I know 'twould." She patted the girl's hand, held between hers. Then having taken the letter, she was beginning to fold it once more when a knock was heard at the dorr.

Quickly she leaned over and whispered, "Look bad ef'n it's thet dude." Then, with an encouraging smile, "don't give nothin' away. I'm here tuh he'p yuh, need be." And, slipping like a ghost into the closet, she shut the door behind her.

After waiting a moment, Eve called, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Bob Bates," a voice replied. When she opened

the door, Abel entered first. She blanched, her eyes widening in terrorized amazement when she saw Bob with him.

"Yuh jis' 'low Hath'way tuh do the talkin', Miss," Bob said.

ABEL NOTICED that she was trembling and that her eyes were distended with worry and fright. Gently, he began, "I want to speak with you," he said. But when he saw that she still stood in fear and indecision, his voice was incisive. "Sit down," he commanded.

She did so, on the edge of the bed, tentatively, opening her mouth as if to speak but remaining silent. Was every one but the Weldons against her? Her thoughts spun dizzily, as separate and unrelated as the wooden horses on a carousal.

Hathaway himself, once she was seated, reached instinctively for the chair that, in his room, stood next to the door. Failing to find it with his hand, he noticed the chair by the bed. Striding over, he was about to sit down when he thought better of it, and, standing, leaned and felt the seat. It was warm. He looked at Eve narrowly.

Correctly interpreting his action, she explained tremulously, "I've been sitting there, trying to collect myself."

"Next to the bed and facing the wall?" he inquired.

Ignoring the question, she reminded him, "You came in to talk to me, Mr. Hathaway."

He smiled a little grimly. "So I did," he agreed. "And so I shall. Before I go any farther, however, I want to know why you screamed."

"If that's all you've come here to say," she retorted angrily, rising, "you had better leave at once. You know very well why I screamed."

"Sit down!" Looking frightened from Abel to Bob and back again, she did so.

ABEL'S MANNER became very courteous, almost courtly. "I do not know—how could I? Please remain in your place, Miss Hunter. I've come here because it's important to me—perhaps to you also—to know why you screamed. I have no other reason, believe me. I can imagine the reason for your distrust of me, but I assure you that my reason for being

clothed is an innocent one. I can't yet explain to you..."

"If you can't explain," she said, "I had rather not hear what else you have to say. I heard one explanation only a few moments ago. it wasn't very good. Now you propose to give me a different one?"

"Please listen tuh him!" Bob begged. "He hed his reasons!"

"Oh!" she flared, "I suppose the whole town will know before I do!"

"I propose to give you no reasons," Hathaway said. "Now, if you will explain why you screamed..."

"I will not," she interrupted decidedly.

Hathaway set his teeth in fury. "Very well," he said. "If my help isn't wanted..."

"Your help!" she repeated scornfully. "You'll probably be needing help yourself, tomorrow!"

"I don't think so," he said. "I intend to avoid Hob Weldon if possible. Now, about the newspaper..."

"You'll want to take that over, of course!"

"Take it over? No...I merely wanted to say that if you want my services, they're still available."

She looked astounded. In a small voice, she asked, "Would you repeat that?"

"I said that, even if I don't have your confidence, I still have my duty to my father's dying wish, and will help you put out the newspaper if you wish."

"Then—then..."

"Exactly."

"Just a moment." Darting to the closet, she flung open the door. "Come out, Mrs. Weldon," she said. "It couldn't have been he."

ABEL REGARDED the flustered Sary with a satiric grin. "Good evening, Mrs. Weldon" he said politely. "I trust you weren't alarmed by my knock?"

Sary said nothing.

"Oh, Mrs. Weldon," Eve said, flushed with relief. "It couldn't have been Mr. Hathaway. It must have been one of those salesmen, or..." she stopped abruptly, her hand to her mouth in horror.

"Exactly," Abel repeated expressionlessly. "Now, why did you scream?"

"Some one put a note under my door. When I read it I couldn't help crying out. Show it to him, Mrs. Weldon." Looking up full into Abel's face, she added, "I could almost weep with relief—except that the Hunters aren't given to weeping."

"I can see that," he said, and took the letter, which Sary reluctantly handed over.

It read: *"If you ever want to see your father again, go back to Natchez immediatly and stay there and dont show this to anybody."* The letter was printed fairly neatly, in large, block characters, and signed *"Sam Hunter"* in pencil.

"The signature is Father's, I'm sure," Eve said.

"Caslon bold primer," Abel murmured under his breath as he read. Then, aloud, "I'm almost insulted, Miss Hunter. Do you really believe I spell 'immediately'..." he stopped himself. "How do you spell 'immediately, Mrs. Weldon?"

"I-m-m-e-d-i-a-t-e-l-y," she responded readily "Why?"

"Well..." Abel's hand went reflectively to his chin. "Whoever got this out knows how to print, but he can't spell. The 'e' is missing from that word."

"Air yuh suspicionin' me, Mr. Hathaway?"

"Frankly, yes. Why are you so eager to run me out of town?"

SARY FLARED into anger. "Yuh ain't a gen'l'm'n, Mr. Hathaway, fer all yore fine clothes! 'Twarn't me thet hed th' i-dee, anyhow. An' as fer Hob..."

"As for Hob," Abel continued for her calmly, "he never had an idea in his head, that you didn't put there. Did he, Mrs. Weldon?"

As answer, Sary slapped his face and ran from the room.

"You weren't very kind, Mr. Hathaway." Eve said, half enraged. "You certainly didn't give her a chance to explain."

"No need," he said positively.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I've discovered more than you think—or than I can tell."

"Surely you can explain to me?"

"Well..." he smiled deprecatingly. "I suppose it's my native secretiveness. Yes, I can explain—to you. Bob's heard

this already, but he won't mind a repetition." Drawing up a chair, and motioning Bob to do likewise, he seated himself beside her.

"You see," he went on, "Jed had directed my suspicions towards the Weldons, and I resolved to do some investigating of my own. Yesterday, when the posse went out to reconnoitre, I joined them, but only as far as Windy Mesa. I had become convinced that, since all the robberies took place in this neighborhood, and since the marauders that the country has suffered from within the past six months had always been traced to that vicinity, Windy Mesa held an important place in the mystery.

"WHILE THE other men searched the surrounding country—incidentally recovering, among other bundles, my spare clothing—I spent my time in looking over the Mesa itself. I discovered that it was as a whole the outcropping of a fault of manganese..." Noting her look of puzzlement, he stopped for a moment and smiled, collecting his thoughts. "It is the sort of place, Miss Hunter," he continued, "where underground caves may be found. I also noticed some plant growth that made me think there might be some drinking water nearby. In short, it occurred to me that there might be hidden away the headquarters of the gang that has been terrorizing the country."

"But why," she inquired, "didn't you call the others and have them help you search for an entrance, to confirm your suspicion?"

"Because," he explained, "there surely weren't enough to take the cave if it existed, against any determined resistance, even by one man; and the failure of an attack would have given our knowledge away and allowed the gang time to escape. We need to tempt them into the open. Besides, I wanted to find just what the connections were."

"Connections?"

"Yes. Those within the cave, and their helpers, must have some way of communicating with leaders on the outside. I thought, and the nearest city is Red Boot, too far away for

any auditory or visual communication."

"Then what..."

"I'm coming to that. When I returned to Red Boot this evening..."

Again there was a knock on the door, this time very peremptory. A harsh voice which Eve recognized as Hob's commanded, "Come on out o' thar, Hath'way. Yuh'll git out o' town tonight!"

OPENING the door, Abel confronted Hob with an impish grin. "Why?" he demanded gently. "It seems Miss Hunter now wishes me to stay —and I always respect the wishes of a lady. Don't you, Hob?"

Hob thrust his prognathous chin forward, but all he could say, complainingly, was, "Now y've insulted m' mother."

Abel laughed outright. Then, to Eve's consternation, he added, "All right. I'll go."

The girl could not restrain a muffled cry. He turned to her and bowed, then picked up his hat and cane. As he started to walk away, he qualified his agreement. "But I'll be back tomorrow," he said gaily.

Hob watched him go. The big man had dressed, and now his hands rested on the handles of his six-shooters. "He won't be back long," he threatened nobody in particular. Then, with a long, hard look at Eve, from which she shrank back against Bob Bates in embarrassment and fear, he strode off to his own room.

SHE STOOD looking after him for a moment, trembling with anxiety; but Abel's casual manner at parting helped reassure her, as, to a lesser degree, did Bob's presence. Abel had seemed so brave and so perfectly in command of the situation! With a little smile playing at the corners of her mouth, as she fought off the revulsion of fear, she closed the door, turning as she did so to Bob.

"I want you to unbolt the door communicating between our rooms, on your side," she said. "I'll feel safer, then."

Bob gulped. "Yes, Miss Eve."

She let him out to the balcony, shut and locked the door, and waited with bated breath until she heard the bolt on the

door between their rooms slide back. Then, with a sigh of relief, she composed herself for bed, if not for slumber.

In the meantime, Hob had reported to his mother, and had received immediate and angry directions. With a whispered "Yes, Maw!" he began to knot the bedsheets together with her aid, and presently let himself down out of the window silently to earth, when he at once made for the stables.

After a moment, two figures emerged. The smaller crept towards the street, while the larger, Hob's, climbed up the makeshift ladder once more.

Down near the end of the street, the smaller figure detected a narrow edge of light, and toward this it crept silently. There was a small, grimy window, with the shade pulled down as tightly as possible. It was the *Clarion* office, and inside were voices.

"BUT I TELL you, Jed," Abel was saying, "I can't understand it. Certainly there must be no love lost between the Weldons and the *Clarion*, in view of that editorial in the first issue, and it is probably as certain that the capture of Sam Hunter was to prevent his reporting who was in the gang, that he met by pure chance. But why Hunter should be forced to write such a letter to Eve—to his daughter—I can't for the life of me fathom. Surely she has no connection with the gang—or, rather, she has but one connection, which could, unfortunately, be quickly severed. I'm talking of her father, of course."

"Can't be so shore thet's th' on'y thing," Jed replied. "Best tuh set an' wait."

"You mean that, even after my discoveries of tonight, I'm to say nothing at all?"

"Thet's it. Yuh see, young feller, I reck'n if anythin's done, thet purty gal ain't a-goin' tuh see her father no more."

"You mean—yes, of course. On the other hand, there's Hob and his threats to me."

"Face him down like a man. Kin yuh?"

"I can, but I don't want to. It's a useless risk." Abel must have seen something like disgut in the old man' face, for he explained hurriedly, "I might be hurt or even killed, and

where would our plans be then?"

"'Bout whar they are now."

"But...! Isn't there a way of handling this lawfully? After all, I've done nothing wrong; quite to the contrary."

"No, thar's no way, not 'thout tippin' 'r hand. Yuh don't look like a cow'rd, young feller."

"I'm not! But I—I have an instinctive dislike of violence. I—there is no way, then?"

"Not till yuh face Hob down. He'll hev his story o' las' night all over town t'morrer mornin'. Run an 'hide, an whut d' yuh think yer evy-dence'll be wuth in this country?"

"I suppose you're right," Abel agreed unwillingly.

Jed became even more persuasive. "An' whut will Sam Hunter think o' yuh?"

"I suppose so," Abel said. Then, rising from the edge of the table on which he had been sitting, he took up his cane. "I'll be leaving..." he began, then thrust himself to one side as he saw Jed's hand streak to holster as the old man rose from his seat to a crouch. The shot came so close it scorched the back of Abel's hand.

WHIRLING around, his cane uplifted, he saw a hand slipping away from the window to which his back had been turned.

Jed's ordinarily watery-looking eyes were like blue gimlets. "You gotta meet vi'lence with vi'lence, young feller," he said in a low voice, but with biting emphasis. "Yuh jis' missed a case o' lead-pizenin'."

Outside, Jed turned over the fallen figure with his toe. "Butch Hapgood."

Understanding lit up Abel's face. "Caslon primer—of course! It was he that printed the note—after the signature was obtained!"

Jed was unimpressed. "Mebbe. Best see the sheriff."

Later that night, a long figure, carrying a cane, went on tip-toe through the silent Palace, up the stairs, and stopped before room 8. The door opened quietly, and the figure disappeared inside. Abel had come home to sleep.

VI

THE POPULATION of Red Boot was considerably augmented the next morning by the arrival in

town of about a dozen ranchhands from the nearby Bar B Bar, who had come to visit Bob Bates and, if the project was feasible, take him back with them. One of them drove a light trap, and in this, Doc Strong agreed, Bob might return.

The men did not, however, leave at once, but stayed to take advantage of their short vacation in buying a few drinks and gew-gaws in the few stores. It was not long before they learned of Hob's ultimatum to Abel; within an hour, a group had gathered around the big man at the Palace bar, listening to his boasting and his interpretation of the affair of the past night, and waiting to see the fun.

The door to Abel's room remained closed.

The L-shaped balcony in the Palace, running from the left as one entered and then across the back of the room, was in clear sight of anyone not at the bar, which it overhung. Bob Bates, sitting across the room from the bar with some friends, was somewhat surprised and shocked to see Eve come out of her room, hesitate a moment, and then hurry past the staircase toward Abel's which was the last but one at the rear. She paused and knocked at the door, and was immediately admitted.

To himself, Bob said, "Hathaway! I didn't know he came back."

Curly Jefferson watched Bob's expression with amusement. "She ain't no lady!" he judged.

Bob scowled, but said nothing.

"Whut's this galoot look like?" Curly went on, baiting his friend. "Good-lookin'?"

"He's all right," Bob said with an effort. "Dresses funny, though . . . I wouldn't be s'prised," he added as an afterthought, "if'n he never showed up."

Curly laughed. "Yuh mean, yuh hope he don't show up. Beatin' yuh time?"

"Now looky here, Curly," Bob retorted angrily, "ther hain't no time tuh beat. Un'erstan'? Miss Eve's a lady, an'—she'll git on tuh Hathaway. Prob'ly jis' talkin' over the paper." This last was without much assurance and Curly laughed once more.

OVER AT the bar, Hob had been informed of Eve's action and he had become silent, leaning back, fingering his holster, and staring steadily up at the top of the staircase. "Goin' tuh talk fust?" he was asked.

"Goin' tuh shoot fust," Hob replied grimly. "He hed his warnin'."

In Abel's room, Eve was pressing the young man's hand. "I'm sorry I misjudged you," she was saying. "You're a very brave man."

"Not as brave as perhaps I look," Abel said, smiling. "My pulse has jumped to a hundred and fifty and I believe I'm beginning to perspire." With this, he stepped toward the door.

"Good luck," she whispered, and, as he paused with his hand on the doorknob, she stepped up behind him and, taking his shoulders, cast an embarrassed kiss that just touched the lobe of his ear.

He turned around quickly, his arms reaching, but she had been quicker than he and was now at the window at the rear of the room, trying to hide an overwhelming blush. He smiled again, tenderly, and taking a deep breath, opened the door.

A rapid glance around showed him Hob a few paces from the bar, glaring at him, and Jed slouched near the cafe entrance. The men who had gathered around Hob shrank back, watching, and Hob's hand crept tentatively toward his holster.

Without sparing his enemy another glance, however, and certainly not reaching for a gun, Abel walked casually toward the stairs, swinging his cane. Hob's gun was half drawn from its holster.

AT THE stairhead, Abel suddenly reached inside his tailcoat, and Hob's gun roared.

As the sound died away into the tinkling of the chandelier, Eve appeared, breathless and white, on the balcony. Looking down, she saw the smoke issuing from Hob's pistol. Abel, a cigar in his hand, had turned half away from him, toward her, and was no derisively fingering the bullet hole in the pillar next to him. When he saw her, he flashed her a smile and winked.

Hob, very red in the face, awaited him as he came slowly

down the stairs and over to the bar. He had replaced his gun and was now half-leaning against the bar, watching Abel's approach. Abel stopped to light the cigar, made a face, smelled the weed, cast it aside, and walked to within a pace of him. "Rather early in the morning to be practicing, isn't it, Mr. Weldon?" he said.

Hob was trembling with rage. "I tol' yuh tuh git out o' town," he said thickly.

Abel chose to disregard this. "You might have hit me, you know, Hob," he went on gently. "That would be murder. Wouldn't it, gentlemen?"

From the men around, he received a faint murmur, which he took for assent. "Of course it would be," he approved. "Red Boot is highly ethical this morning." Noticing the sheriff standing a few yards away, he inquired, "That's a dangerous game Hob plays, Sheriff. Why don't you take his gun away? He's not to be trusted with it."

The sheriff looked at Hob and then at the floor.

Suddenly Hob burst out, "Reach you yella..."

Abel's raised eyebrows and motionless hands forestalled him. "What for?" said the elegantly dressed young man.

HOB CAME a step closer. "Ef'n yo're too yeller tuh fight," he said in an ugly voice, "yore leavin' by han'—withouten yore purty pants." And he reached for Abel with one great paw.

So quickly that it had resumed its former position by his side before the men in the room realized what was happening, Abel's cane whipped out. Very like a whip, it flicked smartly across Hob's wrist, causing the big man to draw back the hand with a howl of pain. With his other hand, Hob reached for his gun, but again the cane flashed out, and the gun went clattering to the floor.

Then began the most amazing duel Red Boot had ever seen. Hob, screaming like an enraged beast, tried to get at Abel with his hands, tried to reach his fallen weapon; Abel, a derisive smile twisting his handsome face devilishly, was too quick with his cane. It was a struggle between the im-

mense, blundering bull and the slashing, vindictive wolf.

Time after time Hob's wrists were cracked, his hands so numbed they could grasp nothing; the men could see the deeper red of blood against the angry welts. Time after time the metal tip of the cane lashed at Hob's head dealing blows that would have struck a lesser man unconscious, and, by Abel's dexterity, each time snapping away a portion of hair and scalp. leaving Hob's head scarred like a clown's and his forehead a greasy waterfall of mingled blood and sweat. Hob's voice had risen from a bellow to a steady scream of rage, sending shivers down the backs of the strongest men, who watched the cruel spectacle shuddering and silent.

Finally, struck dumb at last by his own pain and fury Hob leaped full at Abel, leaving the floor in a monstrous lunge. The ferrule of the cane struck him under the chin as Abel stepped lightly to one side, but the force of his charge carried him onward, so that the cane, like a blunt sword, pierced his flesh. Blood gushed from his open mouth, and he fell, fainting with agony, at the smaller man's feet. For a moment he sat there, while a sigh of horror broke spontaneously through the room, and then he lurched over on his side among the debris of the fight, his hands to his face, sobbing in an extremity of pain and frustration. From the balcony, a wailing cry cut the air. It was Sary.

ABEL LOOKED at his bloody cane with distaste. Then, with an angry grimace, he broke it over his knee and flung it far from him into a corner of the room. "Get this man a doctor," he said, and his voice was hard. His jaw clamped firmly, he strode from the place, looking neither to the right nor left.

The two women, Sary and Eve, rushed down the staircase together. Sary, moaning gently, knelt by Hob, and, taking him in her arms rocked his head against her breast. Eve, after pausing for a moment by the mother and son, rushed on out after Abel.

"He ain't human," Curly Jefferson said to Bob Bates.

Bob shook his head, watching Eve's retreating figure.

"Let's go," he said, rising.

When Eve called after him, Abel turned to face her, but his shoulders stooped and his eyes were on the ground. She walked up to him slowly and touched his arm inquiringly.

"Don't feel that way, Abel," she begged.

HIS HURT eyes sought hers, and he smiled twistedly. "Does it take mayhem to have you call me by my given name?" he asked wryly.

"Please, Abel!" The hand that was on his arm tightened; then, as if in wonderment, her fingertips traced down his face the passage of a single tear that had escaped restraint. Desperately, his head bent, he grasped her hand and kissed it, and instantly she was in his arms. The agony of suspense and trepidation that had held them both in bands of steel so long flowed out in the passion of a hard embrace, and left them trembling and weak, but somehow cooler and more at peace.

Still held in the curve of his arm, she looked up at him, and a slow, withdrawing smile worked her lips. She did not need to have him say he loved her. Their look was held, and the sympathy and adoration that existed between them swiftly cemented in its intensity. Then, arm in arm, slowly and silently, they continued down the road toward the *Clarion*.

Jed, who had followed them, smiled, and approached their rendezvous by the easiest stages he could invent, knocking loudly on the door when he reached it. There was much of importance to discuss, he knew, but he was also wise enough to know that for the moment it had been superseded by even more important matters, that brooked no third party as spectator.

A number of others had trailed after Abel and Eve when they had left the cafe, and among them were Bob and Curly Jefferson.

"Looks like th' end for you," Curly said. "Ef'n the boys is ready, we'll go."

His face set, Bob detained his friend, grasping his elbow hard. His voice was strained but even. "This ain't th' end," he said. "We'll stick aroun'."

Curly laughed. "It's th' end f' you, Bob, sho' nuff!" he

teased. "An' they's mebbe twenny mo' know 'tis, too."

"Thet's not whut I'm talkin' about," Bob responded quietly. "I knowed from the beginnin' I didn't stand no chance 'th Miss Eve. But they's boun' tuh be mo' action, an' I aim tuh be in on it."

"Oh. How 'bout the res' o' the boys?"

Bob's expression quickened. "Cud yuh git 'm tuh stay?"

"I kin try. Come on."

IN THE *Clarion* office, a council of war was being held.

"You remember what I told you last night, Jed," Abel was saying. "Eve has the note with her."

The girl handed the scrap of paper to Jed, who read it with interest.

"It must have been Butch that printed it," Abel went on, "or at least it probably was. I have no doubt it was he, also, who was spying on us right along. Last night's little accident should deprive the Weldons of a valuable ally. What we have to do now—and I think with all possible dispatch—is to rescue Mr. Hunter; and I believe I have a pretty good idea of where he is and how to get at him."

"How?" Eve asked breathlessly.

"I'm convinced he's hidden somewhere near Windy Mesa—perhaps in it. I thought at first, Eve," he turned to her, "that he was dead. There were bloodstains on his horse. But if he's well enough to make that signature, that firmly, they were no doubt the result of a merely superficial wound."

"Whut 'bout Windy Mesa?" Jed prompted.

"Oh—well it's formation indicates that it's partly hollow; there's a fault near the eastern end..."

Jed slapped his thigh. "Jis' whut I thought!" he exploded. "I allus hed a i-dee the raids was made from thar!"

"You're a..." Abel searched a moment for the word, "...a range detective, aren't you, Jed?"

FROM AN inside pocket, Jed extracted a card and handed it to him. "Cattlemen's 'Sociation," he said simply. "Fac'," he went on with a grin, "they impo'ted me from Kansas City.

I've hed thissere accent so long, can't git rid of it no mo'."

Abel smiled. "I thought as much."

"But thet's not on either side o' the crik" Jed reminded him. "Th' impo'tant thing is tuh ketch Hunter's kidnappers. Miss Hunter—think careful, now—didn't yore father never mention ownin' any lan' aroun' here?"

"Why..." the girl faltered. "I think—no, it couldn't be."

"This is impo'tant!"

"Well—there's a small strip. Father did mention a little land, before we left Natchez. He said that after we made some money we could build a house out there. But it must be very small! A distant cousin named—named..."

"Wilson?"

"That's it! He left it to us. He had an independent income—or something. I don't know much about it."

"Wilson!" Jed repeated triumphantly. "O' course, thet's it!"

"But," the bewildered girl said, "how could it be? It was because of the land, I believe, that father came to Red Boot rather than some other town, but he spoke as if it wasn't large enough for more than a house and a lawn. I don't believe Mr. Wilson ever saw the place—though I can't be sure, because I never saw Mr. Wilson."

"WILSON saw the place, all right," Jed corrected quietly. "He was murdered on it. less'n a yar ago. An' it's jis' thet little strip o' his'n—runs tuh 'bout ten acres—thet completes a line right f'm the Palace tuh Windy Mesa. The 'Sociation 'dvised the Bar B Bar outfit not tuh sell the las' o' their lan' along the road no'th o' Sagebrush Crick, but the Wilson lan' 'cross the road 'd fill in thet gap f' Sary Weldon."

"And," Abel took up the story musingly as if to himself, "the road out of Red Boot runs north to the main trail, meeting it at Windy Mesa. If Eve left town, she could be captured, and both she and her father reckoned with at once. That's the reason for the note. Without a doubt, Hunter has let it slip that he had no will,

or that his property is willed to Eve."

"It is willed to me," Eve said faintly. "He made his will during the War, and told me."

ABEL PACED the floor, pursing his lips. "This is what we must do. You, Eve, let it be known that you're leaving town by the evening stage. Under cover of darkness, you'll be protected, and the back of the gang will be broken. Meanwhile, I'll obtain evidence that will convict the Weldons beyond doubt."

"How?" Jed wanted to know.

"I tried to tell Eve last night. There's a telegraph line connecting Windy Mesa with the Palace Cafe!"

Jed held out his hand. "Shake," he demanded. "I've tried tuh figger thet one out fer two whole months."

Abel grasped his hand warmly. "Then the plan is all right?"

"No, it isn't!" Eve interrupted wildly. "Oh, I'm sorry, but —Abel!!" She clung to him. "Abel, I'm about at the end of my rope. If I must act as a decoy, please, please come with me!" The words tumbled out in frantic urgency. "It would look better, anyway, more logical, that you should leave with me, and I couldn't bear being alone again!"

He held her very close and kissed away the tears that had started at her eyes. "Not ever again," he promised.

JED WAS gratified to find the Bar B boys still in town when the three plotters emerged from their council. He took the sheriff and Bob Bates into his confidence, and it was arranged for the cowboys to form an under-cover escort for the evening stage when it left with Eve and Abel as passengers.

Sary was not to be found; it was reported that she had confined herself to Hob, to take care of him; but Abel and Jed made sure that the whole town knew of Eve's departure, and felt sure that Sary would get wind of it and act according to their plan—notify gang headquarters at the mesa.

It was close to stage-time when Sary appeared, to wish Eve goodbye. "Now don't worry, dearie," the old lady smiled. "I'm sho' ever'thin' is goin' tuh be all right. Ef'n thet nosy

Hathaway...Yuh jes' leave ever'thin' tuh me. I'll git the presses back t'yuh in Natchez 'fore yuh know it. These here is lawless pa'ts, an' I'm mighty sorry yuh hed trouble. But 'pears like we hain't ready yet fer the re-finements o' civil-ization."

"You've been very kind," Eve responded wearily.

VII

SITTING in the jouncing stagecoach, empty of other passengers, with Abel's arm around her shoulders, Eve was surprised to find that she did not feel afraid for herself. There was still that aching anxiety for her father in her breast—a kind of echoing void of loneliness that approached despair—but she felt no active fear. Rather, with her head nestled deep into the curve of Abel's arm and the clasp of his slender, strong fingers around her hand, she felt secure. With her free hand, she traced the veins of his wrist, then, moving languidly toward him, held close to his lapel. Abel smiled, but she could not see how grimly. A new cane rested on the seat beside him, and now there was also the bulge of a revolver at his right hip.

It had been dark when they left Red Boot, and by the time they picked up their protection, about ten miles out, it was night, fortunately overcast and moonless. The little troop of horsemen rode behind the stage, trusting to the dust to shield them from inquiring eyes, for the country was too open for them to parallel the coach's course.

The comfort of Abel's presence and the tiring excitement and suspense of the last hours impelled Eve to rest, and she awoke, startled, from a light nap, when Abel thrust her almost roughly from her seat to the floor. She could see a random gleam of light from his gun-barrel as he leveled it through the window; a couple of quick shots spat fire and sound in the darkness outside, and then Abel's gun spoke roaringly. As if this were a signal, a blaze of gunfire started simultaneously, like a concert of death, all around them. The movement of the coach stopped.

ABOVE THE noise of firing, Eve could hear the whicker of a frightened horse, the whine and splatting ricochet of lead, the yell of a wounded man, and the shriller, more chilling shriek of a stricken mount.

Abel cursed under his breath and paused to reload. Looking down to do so, he saw Eve huddled at his feet, her eyes wide and her lips parted, and he paused to pat her shoulder awkwardly.

"They're on the run!" some one yelled, and Abel's voice cut back through the night, "Half go after them—the rest come with me!"

He jumped out of the coach. Her eyes following him, Eve saw nearby the looming, black outline that she knew must be Windy Mesa. A tremendous burst of emotion constricted her chest and brought her limbs to life. Rapidly she slid from the coach and started after Abel.

She was soon outdistanced, but could dimly discern him struggling, with others, at a great rock near the eastern end of the mesa. By the time she arrived at the group, ropes had been cast over protuberances and horses brought into action to help. Shortly the great stone moved, and then, with a protesting roar, it fell aside, revealing a gaping hole.

Abel lighted a candle which he extracted from his pocket, and handed out two others. "There'll be the devil to pay," Eve heard him mutter, "if they had sense enough to leave anyone at the instrument."

GUNS DRAWN, the group of men, with Eve trailing, advanced into the cave which the removal of the rock had disclosed. At first, only the clatter of their high-heeled boots on the solid floor was heard; then, faintly, as if from a distance, came a call for help.

"Father!" Eve cried in return. Pushing through the men, she came to Abel and grasped frantically at his arm. "Oh, hurry, hurry, do hurry!" she gasped hysterically. "It's he—I know it is!" Abel quickened his step.

The cave gave way first to a narrow passageway, and then to a great cavern, where giant buttresses of red-stained and lavender limestone rose loftily,

reflecting the candles' light as if from a thousand jewels. At the rear of the place was a roughly hewn table and a few chairs, the litter of a recently eaten meal, and, huddled close by, a soiled and rumpled figure toward which Eve ran with a cry of mingled joy and commiseration.

A few hurried, low-spoken words passed between father and daughter; then Eve turned to Abel. "A knife—please. He's tied, and I can't manage the knot."

As Abel bent over the older man, he asked, "Are you hurt, sir?"

Sam Hunter grunted. "No. But I realize I should have been, if you hadn't arrived here. How did you manage it? They had me saying my prayers just before they left, and I can tell you I've spent a most uncomfortable five minutes."

Abel arose, displaying the loosened rope. "Take it easy, Mr. Hunter," he smiled. "I'll give you the whole story in small doses as we ride home in the coach. Incidentally, it isn't finished yet... Here, let me help you chafe those wrists."

"It's all right," Hunter said with some impatience. "They tied me only when they left. They had a couple of men watching me right along until then."

"You mean the gang didn't live in the cave?"

"Heavens, no! I don't know where the rest stay, though they did spend the night and the following morning after the stage-coach raid. They probably have a place hidden out in some canyon."

Eve had both his arm and Abel's. "What matters is that you're safe, darling," she said. "Men! Can't you think of anything but business?"

WHEN, LATER, the three were returning in the coach, Sam Hunter pieced together his story.

"You can remember the general details of my capture as I stopped to speak to the driver of the stage, Abel," he said. "They've kept me in the cave, since. I can't say their treatment was gentle— I know they were prepared to do away with me if it suited their plans. But they weren't cruel, though they threatened me with a branding-iron if I refused to

sign a scrap of paper they handed me."

"That must have been the signature on the note I received," Eve interrupted. She handed it to Sam.

As the older man read, Abel explained, "It was Butch Hapgood who reported that you'd be here. That note was a trick to get you and Eve together. They would have had no compunction about killing you, if they hadn't needed you to sign the note—and possible other notes to follow. It was too risky for them to make any attempts upon Eve while she remained in Red Boot." And he went on to tell Sam what had ccurred in town during his absence.

"WHAT REMAINS to be done," he continued, when he had made the whole story clear, "is to get hold of the Weldons. The telegraph line to Windy Mesa ought to be conclusive enough proof of their guilt, and I have a feeling that we'll find deeds to the land, in Sary's name, in a certain strong-box at the Palace office. It's too bad, Mr. Hunter, that you didn't let Jed know about the land you owned, here, when you had the chance."

Hunter laughed shortly. "Well, I hardly knew whom to trust," he explained, "though, at that, I think I did mention it to Sary Weldon the first day we were here—or at least hinted pretty obviously about George Wilson. You see, I realized there was something wrong in town, but I certainly didn't attach any importance to that little plot of land. It wasn't of much use to me—couldn't be at least for a year or so, you understand—so I naturally failed to suspect anyone else would have any interest in it."

"Naturally," Abel agreed.

"I want to thank you," Sam continued earnestly, "for the help you've been to us. I could hardly ask for more, though I'd like you to stay. You'll probably be leaving for the East again soon?"

Abel glanced at Eve, seated between them, and smiled. "I'd be only too happy to stay, Mr. Hunter," he said, "on one condition."

"What's that?"

"I'll make the bargains from

now on, Father," Eve spoke up with something of her usual spirit. "Your condition, sir," she said to Abel, "is met. Don't listen to Father if he objects. He's undoubtedly light-headed from his late experiences." Then, as she saw the hurt look pass across her father's face, she put her arms around him and kissed him. "I'm only fooling, dear pere," she said gently, "and I love you. But another love has come into my life—you won't be jealous...?"

"In fact," Abel interrupted, "I'm asking for the hand of your daughter—I realize this is neither the time nor the place..."

Sam waved his hand tiredly. "Any place is the place and any time's the time for love," he corrected. "But this is a little— I thought, Eve— That cowboy, Bates...?"

"Dear Father! How little you understand women!"

Sam grunted, and relaxed in his seat. "This is a new, young country," he said. "Things happen too fast for an old southern gentleman." Then he turned to Eve with a loving smile. "I have great faith in your judgment, girl," he said.

DESPITE the urgent need for quick action, the sheriff's insistence that "everthin' be done legal-like" and his neglecting to make out warrants for search and arrest before the cavalcade returned from Windy Mesa, took up valuable time. Sary noticed the action around the sheriff's office, and was at once filled with premonition. When she failed to get a response over her telegraph system, she became really alarmed, and aided by Hob, with his bandaged

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head and all, began to pack hurriedly. Lighting up the cafe and instructing her piano-player to play furiously as if nothing were happening, she prepared to take quick leave.

But it was too late. When the posse crowded to the door of the cafe, Sary was standing near the bar. Quickly she ducked behind it, and the men missed sight of her. As they streamed up the stairs to search the room, she edged slowly toward the door. Hob, she knew, was in the office getting the strong-box, and she hoped that he had sense enough to skip out of the rear door.

Eve had insisted upon seeing the arrest, and Sam finally gave in to her. So it happened that Sary, approaching the front entrance, was alarmed by their footsteps on the stairs, and scuttled back the other way.

She appeared from behind the bar at the same moment that Eve, Sam, and Abel entered. Hearing Eve's startled cry, she whirled around, pointing a revolver. "Hist yore han's," she screamed, "less'n I shoot the gal!"

Simultaneously, Hob appeared from the office carrying a shotgun, with the posse of eight men at the door of room 7. A blast from the shotgun drove them back, and Sary yelled, "Tell 'em, tuh come out with their han's up!"

Sam, seeing her finger tightening on the trigger, cried hoarsely, "For Heaven's sake do what she says, men!" The posse came out grumbling, but with their hands held high. Abel could see Jed among them, quivering with anger.

"Ever'thin's all set, Maw," Hob urged. "Come on."

But Sary only said, "I got a score tuh settle, Hob."

"Aright, Maw."

"Watch these'n upstairs, Hob."

AS HE BACKED outwards with his shotgun at the ready, she advanced to the middle of the floor. "I reckon I know whut yuh come fer, Sheriff," she said slowly, without turning around, "an' mebbe y'll git it—an' mebbe yuh won't. Right now I got other things tuh worry on. Things was gittin' along purty nice tell a couple pussons come tuh

[Turn To Page 122]

SKINNY

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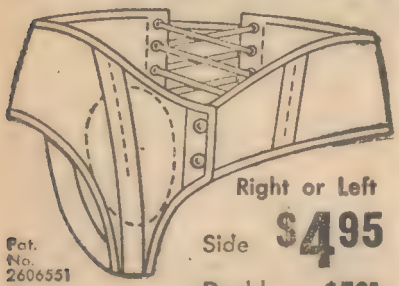

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town. There mebbe ain't no good tuh whut I'm gonna do, but it'll kinda ease muh soul tuh know ther daid!" For a long moment she glared at those in the doorway, her eyes finally coming to rest on Abel. "You fust, Mister Yankee," she said in a low voice that trembled with hate.

"Sary!" The sheriff spoke, perhaps for the first time in his life convincingly. "Yuh don't stan' a chance. Soon's yuh shoot, some un of us'll git yuh."

But Sary was unconvinced. "Yuh heerd him, Hob." Tremendous damage could be done with a charge of buckshot, and the men knew it. Their guns lay on the floor or in their holsters. Mother and son stood advantageously back to back in the middle of the floor. Silence rang, more obvious than a cannon-shot, through the hall.

Abel began to speak, hoping to gain time, "Why don't you wait for a fair trial, Mrs. Weldon?" he began. "The evidence..."

Her voice cut into his like a sharp knife into living flesh.

[*Turn To Page* 124]

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"Say yore prayers, Yankee!"

HIS SENSES more alert than ever, he could feel a stir somewhere. Behind him? Among the men crowded together on the balcony? He couldn't tell. Somewhere there was Eve's soft moan—perhaps he imagined it— "Oh, no!" His vision wavered; the fantastic accident seemed unreal; he felt as he did when in the grip of a nightmare—terrified, but fundamentally sure it wasnt true. The events of the past week—his father's death, the train-ride, the attack on the coach—flew through his head in kaleidoscope flashes, and through it all he felt Eve's soft arms about his neck.

Suddenly there was a crunching of earth outside, and the rap of a decisive footstep on the cafe stairs. In the infinitesmal moment that the Weldons twitched in reaction to this new sound, Abel saw Jed's hand streak with indescribable speed to his holster.

There was the crack of a pistol, followed by the shotgun's roar. Abel, throwing Eve heavily to one side,

[*Turn To Page* 126]

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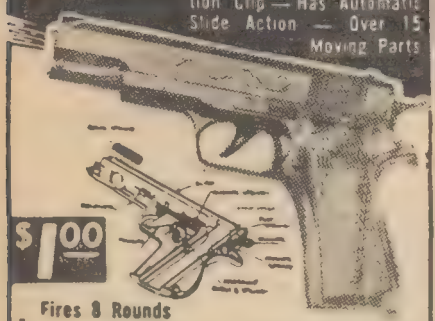

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dropped prone, and felt Sary's bullet whiz by his ear as he did so. Hob's movement had spoiled her aim. Then—it looked like something out of a dream —Sary was covered with a silvery rain. Jed's bullet had struck Hob fatally as the latter had begun to fire. The shotgun went off, but at a high angle, shattering the chandelier.

Her face a twisted mask of grief as she felt Hob recoil against her, Sary turned around and bent over him as he fell. Then, while a gasp of horror went up from the posse, the immense chandelier, symbol of Sary's pride and greed, began, with an agonized creaking and snapping of timbers, to fall. Hob's wild discharge had hit the fixture at its mooring.

Startled, Sary looked up, and, her arms covering her head while she shrieked in dismay, began to run. But it was too late. With a roaring crash, the glass and iron orna-

ment ripped down, pinning her beneath. There was one last despairing shriek, then silence.

A STRANGE voice spoke first. "Dear me!"

As the posse rushed down the stairs to extract the bodies of Sary and Hob from the tremendous wreckage, Abel rose and addressed the newcomer. "I don't know who you are, sir, but I want to thank you. You saved our lives."

"And nearly lost my own. Is this the regular thing here?"

Abel laughed. "Hardly. At least, no more."

The stranger was a little, pompous man, extravagantly dressed, and wearing a long moustache and sideburns. He handed Abel a card. "Permit me. You seem to be in charge, here."

Abel read, and handed the card silently to Sam Hunter.

"So you're an agent for the railroad," Hunter said. "What can we do for you, sir? Are you buying land?"

"Land? Oh, no. We need

[*Turn Page*]

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men to work on construction, and hunters for meat."

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"Why—yes. Not directly north, of course. The soil's too loose for a good road-bed. We bought land"—he said it as if he had done it personally—"from the government—just north of—what is the name of the place?—oh, yes!—Windy Mesa."

"North of Windy Mesa?" Hunter repeated in astonishment.

"Why, yes! North—of—Windy—Mesa. Yes, of course!"

Abel began to laugh; in a moment Hunter joined him; and the pompous little man, retrieving his card, eyed first them and then the cafe at large contemptuously. "Queer," he sniffed.

"YUH LOOK fine, young feller," Jed had occasion to compliment Abel, about a week later, "ef'n jis' yuh wasn't

[*Turn To Page* 130]

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so gol-durn jittery. Skeered?"

"About twice as scared as I was when Sary had that gun pointed at me, Jed."

"Shucks! Ain't no reason! I'll be ther t'day same's I was then." Jed chuckled.

"I know. But this time, Jed, it's going to happen!"

"Want me tuh take yore place? Will, in a minute. I'm still a spry un!"

"No, thanks." Abel grinned broadly. "Say, old man, when are you going to lose that fake accent?"

"Practicin'. Soon's yo're safe married, I'm headin' south aways. Little trouble by the border."

"Just a little? Why don't you stay here and help me safeguard the dignity of the press?"

"Here?"

"Well, then, in the new town over by Windy Mesa—you literal varmint!"

"Nope. Hain't much on dignity. Now, come on. Yo're late tuh church."

Abel flung an arm around his old friend's shoulders. "Well, man," he said, "you'll always know where to find a big meal and a bigger welcome mat hung out... By the way, I hope you've forgotten the ring?"

"Nope." Jed grinned and held the circle up to Abel's eye. "I'm still fer law an' order, young feller, 'n' yo're a-goin' tuh marry thet gal ef'n I hev tuh draw muh gun on yuh."

As he rode away from Red Boot, Jed caught his last glimpse of Eve and Abel. Eve distrusted long good-byes, so they had said theirs an hour before, at the door of the *Clarion* office.

He moved on, and the last he saw, before he went over the brow of a little hill, was their two outlines blend into one.

Something about it cheered Jed, and he began to whistle.

THE END

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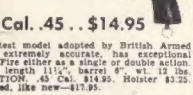

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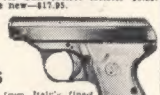

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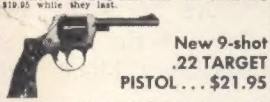
Sensational new slide rod .22 shoots all three—long, short, and long rifle .22 ammo. Double and single action. A light, well-made piece, it looks like an old frontier revolver, acts like an old frontier revolver, but shoots popular, inexpensive .22 ammo. Terrific gun for fast draw enthusiasts, for practice and plinking. Looks sharp as a tack. Feels just right. Not $62, not $73.00, but only $19.95. Complete with fast draw holster $24.95. Holster alone, $7.50.

Famous Make BELGIUM PISTOL $19.95

Sorry, we can't divulge the name of this famous-make in this advertisement due to the sensational LOW PRICE. Terrific bargain. Available in Cals. .380 or .22 Long Rifle Blue. Gift boxed, only $19.95 while they last.

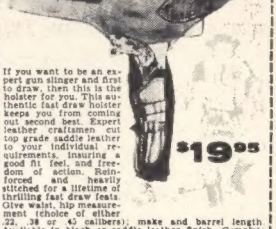


New 9-shot .22 TARGET PISTOL . . . $21.95

Fires standard & high velocity shorts, longs & L.R. ammo. Excellent for target, plinking or home protection. Specs: 9-shot revolver, double & single action, solid frame, safety cyl. (recessed head space). Choice of 4" bbl. or 2" bbl. Only $21.95.

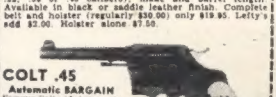
Dependable, compact. Makes excellent target & protective sidearm. Specs: Swinging-out cyl. 6-shot, 4" barrel, fixed sights, orig. Colt hardwood grips, newly blued, good condition inside & out. Fires popular .38 Colt ammo. Only $32.50.

Sporting **FAST DRAW HOLSTER**



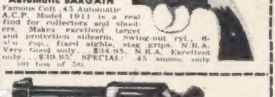
If you want to be an expert gun slinger and first to draw, then this is the holster for you. This authentic fast draw holster keeps you from coming out second best. Expert leather craftsmen cut top grade saddle leather to your individual requirements, insuring a good fit feel, and freedom of action. Reinforced and heavily stitched for a lifetime of thrilling fast draw feats. Give waist, hip measurement. Choice of either .22, .38 or 45 calibers; make and barrel length. Available in black or saddle leather finish. Complete belt and holster (regularly $30.00) only $19.95. Left's add $2.00. Holster alone $7.50.

$19.95



COLT .45 Automatic BARGAIN

Famous Colt .45 Automatic A.C.P. Model 1911 is a real find for collectors and shooters. Makes excellent target and protection sidearm. Swing-out cyl., fixed sight, fixed sights, stag grips. N.R.A. Very Good only . . $34.95. N.R.A. Excellent only . . $39.95. SPECIAL: .45 ammo, only 10¢ box of 50.



NEW .22 REVOLVER . . . $13.95

Excellent for target, plinking or defense. *Thousands sold.* This new 6-shot Rocco Vest Pocket revolver is a light, accurate, well-made piece. 2½" bbl., 5" overall. Fires popular .22 short ammo. Features side gate loading, hair trigger adjustment, screw-in ejector rod. Has steel rifled barrel with blade front sight. Normally sold in $25-$28 range, NOW ONLY $13.95. Leather holster $3.95. .22 short ball ammo $1 for 100 rds.

.22 MOSSBERGS

Small lot of American made Mossbergs issued to WW II British troops for special training. Bears British Royal Proof House marks.

$14.95

Ramp front sight. Walnut stock. 7-shot clip. Fires shorts, longs and L.R., ammo. Weighs 7 lbs. 20" bbl. Outside condition good, bore good. Mechanically perfect. Excellent for rifle teams.

DOUBLE .22 CAL. DERRINGER $19.95

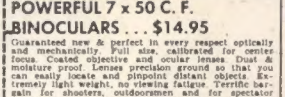
Imported from Europe. It is an exact copy of famous Remington Derringer popular in the late 1800's. Valuable collectors' item. Fine "old world" gun craftsmanship has been employed to give you a superior handgun & still retain all the features of the original Derringer. Accurate. Shoots .22 short, long or long rifle ammo. Beautiful blued finish with contrasting checkered black grips. Only $19.95. Western Derringer holster $3.25.

S & W .38 Revolver . . $24.95

PERFECT SHOOTING CONDITION. Migred in U. S. & issued to British Commando Forces in WWII. 6-shot, swing-out cylinder, fine condition inside and out. A $60 value new. 5" barrel, wt. 31 oz., fixed sights, parkerize finish, hardwood grips. Fires Amer. made .38 S & W ammo. Only $24.95.

POWERFUL 7 x 50 C. F. BINOCULARS . . . $14.95

Guaranteed new & perfect in every respect optically and mechanically. Full size, calibrated for center focus. Coated objective and ocular lenses. Dust & moisture proof. Lenses precision ground so that you can easily locate and pinpoint distant objects. Extremely light weight, no viewing fatigue. Terrific bargain for shooters, outdoorsmen and for spectator events. Superior light refraction assures crystal clear images even under adverse lighting conditions. Binocular has jet black pebble grain finish with strap. Fits into beautiful plaskin case with strap. COMPLETE: 7 x 50 Binocular, carrying case, warranty and gift box. Regularly $29.95, NOW ONLY $14.95. Order while they last.



BRIGHT NICKELLED S. & W. .38 SPECIAL 2" Bbl. REVOLVER . . $39.95

Made in U.S. by Smith & Wesson, these fine 6-shot revolvers with swing-out cylinder are terrific buys. Fine condition inside & out. Fixed sights with rich nickel-plated finish and sharp stag grips. Fires pop. American made .38 Special S. & W. ammo. Only $39.95. Leather holster only $3.95

GENUINE MEXICAN LONGHORNS

These wild-eyed critters were introduced to the Americas back in 1521 at Vera Cruz. Each set has its own individual markings yet appears approximately as set shown. Makes a wonderful conversation piece when placed above fireplace, mantel, over bar or in den. Sets between 5' and 6'

$29.95

All sets are approximately 5 to 6 feet wide. Each set has its own individual markings yet appears approximately as set shown. Makes a wonderful conversation piece when placed above fireplace, mantel, over bar or in den. Sets between 5' and 6'

hand-polished to a smooth as silk surface. Leather centerpiece is genuine hand-tooled cow hide. Choice of dark or light brown leather.

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Until recently the process of hypnotic induction was largely based on trial and error methods which succeeded mainly with subjects who were highly susceptible to hypnosis in the first place. The truth is that these highly susceptible subjects make up a very small percentage of the population. That is why amateurs and beginning hypnotists have so often been disappointed in their attempts at trance induction. Now, however, recent scientific research has developed ENTIRELY NEW METHODS that are not only sure fire in their results but quick and easy to achieve! For the first time, these new methods are presented in HOW TO HYPNOTIZE in language that you can easily and successfully follow on the very first reading!

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This book – which has been acclaimed by doctors and psychologists – is guaranteed to give you all the know-how necessary to induce the trance state in others. It not only explains the latest discoveries in hypnotic induction, but it shows step by step, move by move, exactly how to bring on the trance; how to transform the trance into deeper and still deeper states; and how to terminate the trance quickly and effectively without any dangers whatsoever. You are even given alternative methods, so that you can actually chose the one that suits you best.

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